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SCIENCE FICTION

BRITISH EDITION No. 2
OCTOBER 1963

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SCIENCE FICTION MONTHLY

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SCIENCE FICTION

OCTOBER



LEIGH BRACKETT
EDGAR PANGBORN

GORDON R. DICKSON
THEODORE STURGEON

Leigh Brackett



the X-rays showed that the boy was very *different* . . . that was the beginning—the end came on cloud-wrapped Buckhorn Mountain, with deadly green lightning and a sound in the sky that was not wind or thunder. . . .

THE STRANGE ONES

I RAN down Buckhorn Mountain in the cloud and rain, carrying the boy in my arms. The green lightning flashed among the trees. Buckhorn is no stranger to lightning, but this was different. It did not come from the clouds, and there was no thunder with it. It ran low, searching the thickets, the brush-choked gullies, the wet hollows full of brambles and poison ivy. Thick green hungry snakes looking for something. Looking for me.

Looking for the boy who had started it all.

He peered up at me, clinging like a lemur to my coat as I went headlong down the slope. His eyes were copper-colored. They had seen a lot for all the two-and-a-half years they had been open on this world. They were frightened now, not just vaguely as you might expect from a child his age, but intelligently. And in his curiously sweet shrill voice he asked:

"Why mus' they kill us?"

"Never mind," I said, and ran and ran, and the green lightning hunted us down the mountainside.

It was Doc Callendar, the County Health Officer, who got me in on the whole thing. I am Hank Temple, owner, editor, feature writer, legman, and general roustabout of the *Newhale News*, serving Newhale and the rural and mountain areas around it. Doc Callendar, Sheriff Ed Betts and I are old friends, and we work together, helping out where we can. So one hot morning in July my phone rang and it was Doc, sounding kind of dazed.

"Hank?" he said. "I'm at the hospital. Would you want to take a run up here for a minute?"

"Who's hurt?"

"Nobody. Just thought something might interest you."

Doc was being cagey because anything you say over the phone in Newhale is public property. But even so the tone of his voice put prickles between my shoulder-blades. It didn't sound like Doc at all.

"Sure," I said. "Right away."

Newhale is the county seat, a small town, and a high town. It lies in an upland hollow of the Appalachians, a little clutter of old red brick buildings with porches on thin wooden pillars, and frame houses ranging from new white to weathered silver-gray, centered around the dumpy courthouse. A very noisy stream bisects the town. The tannery and the feed mill are its chief industries, with some mining nearby. The high line comes down a neat cut on Tunkhannock Ridge to the east and goes away up a neat cut on Goat Hill to the west. Over all towers the rough impressive hump of Buckhorn Mountain, green on the ridges, shadowed blue in the folds, wrapped more often than not in a mist of cloud.

There is not much money nor any great fame to be made in Newhale, but there are other reasons for living here. The girl I wanted to marry couldn't quite see them, and it's hard to explain to a woman why you would rather have six pages of small-town newspaper that belong to you than the whole of the *New York Times* if you only work for it. I gave up trying, and she went off to marry a gray flannel suit, and every time I unlimber my fishing-rod or my deer rifle I'm happy for her.

The hospital is larger than you might expect, since it serves a big part of the county. Sitting on a spur of Goat Hill well away from the tannery, it's an old building with a couple of new wings tacked on. I found Doc Callendar in his office, with Bossert. Bossert is the resident doctor, a young guy who knows more, in the old phrase, than a jackass could haul downhill. This morning he looked as though he wasn't sure of his own name.

"Yesterday," Doc said, "one of the Tate girls brought her kid in, a little boy. I wasn't here, I was out testing those wells up by Pinecrest. But I've seen him before. He's a stand-out, a real handsome youngster."

"Precocious," said Jim Bossert nervously. "Very precocious for his age. Physically, too. Coordination and musculature well developed. And his coloring—"

"What about it?" I asked.

"Odd. I don't know. I noticed it, and then forgot it. The kid looked as though he'd been through a meat-grinder. His mother said the other kids had ganged up and beaten him, and he hadn't been right for several days, so she reckoned she'd better bring him in. She's not much more than nineteen herself. I took some X-rays—"

Bossert picked up a couple of pictures from the desk and shoved them at me. His hands shook, making the stiff films rattle together.

"I didn't want to trust myself on these. I waited until Callendar could check them, too."

I held the pictures up and looked at them. They showed a small, frail bony structure and the usual shadowy outline of internal organs. It wasn't until I had looked at them for several minutes that I began to realize there was something peculiar about them. There seemed to be too few ribs, the articulation of the joints looked queer even to my layman's eyes, and the organs themselves were a hopeless jumble.

"Some of the innards," said Doc, "we can't figure out at all. There are organs we've never seen nor heard of before."

"Yet the child seems normal and perfectly healthy," said Bossert. "Remarkably so. From the beating he'd taken he should have had serious injuries. He was just sore. His body must be as flexible and tough as spring steel."

I put the X-rays back on the desk. "Isn't there quite a large literature on medical anomalies?"

"Oh, yes," said Doc. "Double hearts, upside-down stomachs, extra arms, legs, heads—almost any distortion or variation you can think of. But not like this." He leaned over and tapped his finger emphatically on the films. "This isn't a distortion of anything. This is *different*. And that's not all."

He pushed a microscope slide toward me.

"That's the capper, Hank. Blood sample. Jim tried to type it. I tried to type it. We couldn't. There isn't any such type."

I stared at them. Their faces were flushed, their eyes were bright, they quivered with excitement, and suddenly it got to me too.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Are you trying to tell me—"

"We've got something here," said Doc Callendar. "Something—" He shook his head. I could see the dreams in it. I could see Callendar standing ten feet tall on a pedestal of medical journals. I could see him on podiums addressing audiences of breathless men, and the same dreams were in Bossert's eyes.

I had my own. The *Newhale News* suddenly a famous name on the wire-services, and one Henry Temple bowing with modest dignity as he accepted the Pulitzer Prize for journalism.

"Big," said Bossert softly. "The boy is more than a freak. He's something new. A mutation. Almost a new species. The blood-type alone—"

Something occurred to me and I cut him short. "Listen," I said. "Listen, are you sure you didn't make a mistake or something? How could the boy's

blood be so different from his mother's?" I hunted for the word. "Incompatibility. He'd never have been born."

"Nevertheless," said Doc Callendar mildly, "he was born. And nevertheless, there is no such blood-type. We've run tests backward and forward, together and independently. Kindly allow us to know what we're talking about, Hank. The boy's blood obviously must have been compatible with his mother's. Possibly it's a more advanced Type O, universally compatible. This is only one of the many things we have to study and evaluate."

He picked up the X-ray films again and looked at them, with an expression of holy ecstasy in his eyes.

I lighted another cigarette. My hands were shaking now, like theirs. I leaned forward.

"Okay," I said. "What's the first thing we do?"

Doc's station wagon, with COUNTY HEALTH SERVICE painted on its side, slewed and snorted around the turns of the steep dirt road. Jim Bossert had had to stay at the hospital, but I was sitting beside Doc, hunched forward in a sweat of impatience. The road ran up around the shoulder of Tunkhannock Ridge. We had thick dark woods on our right going up, and thick dark woods on our left going down. Buckhorn hung in the north like a curtain across the sky.

"We'll have to be careful," Doc was saying. "I know these people pretty well. If they get the idea we're trying to pull something, we'll never get another look at the kid."

"You handle it," I said. "And by the way, nobody's mentioned the boy's father. Doesn't he have one?"

"Do you know the Tate girls?"

"No. I've been through Possum Creek all right, but through it is all."

"You must have gone fast," said Doc, grinning. "The answer is physiologically yes, legally are you kidding?" He shifted into second, taking it easy over a place where the road was washed and gullied. "They're not a bad bunch of girls at that, though," he added reflectively. "I kind of like them. Couple of them are downright married."

We bucketed on through the hot green shadows, the great centers of civilization like Newhale forgotten in the distance behind us, and finally in a remote pocket just under Tunkhannock's crest we came upon a few lean spry cattle, and then the settlement of Possum Creek.

There were four ancient houses straggled out along the side of the stream. One of them said GENERAL STORE and had a gas pump in front of it. Two old men sat on the step.

Doc kept on going. "The Tates," he said, straight-faced, "live out a little from the center of town."

Two more turns of the road, which was now only a double-rutted track, brought us to a rural mailbox which said TATE. The house behind it was pretty well run down, but there was glass in most of the windows and only half the bricks were gone from the chimney. The clapboards were sort of a rusty brown, patched up with odds and ends of tarpaper. A woman was

washing clothes in an old galvanized tub set on a stand in the side yard. There was a television aerial tied on cock-eyed to the gable of the house. There was a sow with a litter in a pen right handy to the door, and a little way at the back was a barn with the ridge-pole swayed like an old horse. A tarpaper shack and a battered house-trailer were visible among the trees—probably the homes of the married daughters. An ancient man sat in an ancient rocking-chair on the porch and peered at us, and an ancient dog beside him rose up heavily and barked.

I've known quite a lot of families like the Tates. They scratch out enough corn for their pigs and their still-houses, and enough garden for themselves. The young men make most of their money as guides during hunting season, and the old men make theirs selling moonshine. They have electricity now, and they can afford radios and even television sets. City folks call them lazy and shiftless. Actually, they find the simple life so pleasant that they hate to let hard work spoil their enjoyment of it.

Doc drove his station wagon into the yard and stopped. Instantly there was an explosion of dogs and children and people.

"There he is," Doc said to me, under cover of the whooping and woofing and the banging of screen doors. "The skinny little chap with the red hair. There, just coming down the steps."

I looked over and saw the boy.

He was an odd one, all right. The rest of the Tate tribe all had straight hair ranging from light brown to honey-blond. His was close and curly to his head and I saw what Jim Bossert had meant about his coloring. The red had undertones of something else in it. One would almost, in that glare of sunlight, have said silver. The Tates had blue eyes. His were copper-colored. The Tates were fair and sunburned, and so was he, but there was a different quality of fairness to his skin, a different shading to the tan.

He was a little boy. The Tate children were rangy and big boned. He moved among them lightly, a gazelle among young goats, with a totally unchildlike grace and sureness. His head was narrow, with a very high arch to the skull. His eyes were grave, precociously wise. Only in the mouth was there genuine childishness, soft and shy.

We got out of the car. The kids—a dozen of them, give or take a couple—all stopped as though on a signal and began to study their bare feet. The woman came from the washtub, wiping her hands on her skirt. Several others came out of the house.

The little boy remained at the foot of the steps. His hand was now in the hand of a buxom girl. Judging by Bossert's description, this would be his mother. Not much over nineteen, handsome, big-breasted, full-hipped. She was dressed in tight jeans and a boy's shirt, her bare feet stuck into sandals, and a hank of yellow hair hung down her back.

Doc spoke to them all, introducing me as a friend from town. They were courteous, but reserved. "I want to talk to Sally," he said, and we moved closer to the steps. I tried not to look at the boy lest the glitter in my eye give me away. Doc was being so casual and hearty it hurt. I could feel a

curious little prickle run over my skin as I got close to the child. It was partly excitement, partly the feeling that here was a being different from myself, another species. There was a dark bruise on the child's forehead, and I remembered that the others had beaten him. Was this *otherness* at the bottom of their resentment? Did they sense it without the need for blood samples and X-rays?

Mutant. A strange word. A stranger thing to come upon here in these friendly familiar hills. The child stared at me, and the July sun turned cold on my back.

Doc spoke to Sally, and she smiled. She had an honest, friendly smile. Her mouth was wide and full, frankly sensuous but without coquetry. She had big blue eyes, and her sunburned cheeks were flushed with health, and she looked as uncomplicated and warmly attractive as a summer meadow. I wondered what strange freak of genetics had made her the fountainhead of a totally new race.

Doc said, "Is this the little boy you brought in to the hospital?"

"Yes," she said. "But he's better now."

Doc bent over and spoke to the boy. "Well," he said. "And what's your name, young man?"

"Name's Billy," he answered, in a grave sweet treble that had a sound in it of bells being rung far off. "Billy Tate."

The woman who had come from the washtub said with unconcealed dislike, "He ain't no Tate, whatever he might be."

She had been introduced as Mrs. Tate, and was obviously the mother and grandmother of this numerous brood. She had lost most of her teeth and her gray-blond hair stood out around her head in an untidy brush. Doc ignored her.

"How do you do, Billy Tate," he said. "And where did you get that pretty red hair?"

"From his daddy," said Mrs. Tate sharply. "Same place he got his sneaky-footed ways and them yellow eyes like a bad hound. I tell you, Doctor, if you see a man looks just like that child, you tell him to come back and get what belongs to him!"

A corny but perfectly fitting counterpart to her words, thunder crashed on Buckhorn's cloudy crest, like the ominous laughter of a god.

Sally reached down suddenly and caught up the boy into her arms. . . .

The thunder quivered and died on the hot air. I stared at Doc and he stared at me, and Sally Tate screamed at her mother.

"You keep your dirty mouth off my baby!"

"That ain't no way to talk to Maw," said one of the older girls. "And anyway, she's right."

"Oh," said Sally. "You think so, do you?" She turned to Doc, her cheeks all white now and her eyes blazing. "They set their young ones on my baby, Doctor, and you know why? They're jealous. They're just sick to their stomachs with it, because they all got big hunkety kids that can't do nothin'

but eat, and big hunkety men that treat them like they was no better'n brood sows."

She had reached her peak of fury so quickly that it was obvious this row had been going on for a long while, probably ever since the child was born.

Possibly even before, judging by what she said then.

"Jealous," she said to her sisters, showing her teeth. "Evcry last one of you was dancing up and down to catch his eye, but it was me he took to the hayloft. *Me*. And if he ever comes back he can have me again, for as often and as long as he wants me. And I won't hear no ill of him nor the baby!"

I heard all this. I understood it. But not with all, or even most of my mind. That was busy with another thing, a thing it didn't want to grapple with at all and kept shying away from, only to be driven back shivering.

Doc put it into words.

"You mean," he said, to no one in particular, "the boy looks just like his father?"

"Spit an' image," said Sally fondly, kissing the red curls that had that queer glint of silver in them. "Sure would like to see that man again, I don't care what they say. Doctor, I tell you, he was beautiful."

"Handsome is as handsome does," said Mrs. Tate. "He was no good, and I knew it the minute I saw—"

"Why, Maw," said Mr. Tate, "he had you eating out of his hand, with them nicey ways of his." He turned to Doc Callendar, laughing. "She'd a' gone off to the hayloft with him herself if he'd asked her, and that's a fact. Ain't it, Harry?"

Harry said it was, and they all laughed.

Mrs. Tate said furiously, "It'd become you men better to do something about getting some support for that brat from its father, instead of making fool jokes in front of strangers."

"Seems like, when you bring it up," said Mr. Tate, "it would become us all not to wash our dirty linen for people who aren't rightly concerned." He said courteously to Doc, "Reckon you had a reason for coming here. Is there something I can do?"

"Well—", said Doc uncertainly, and looked at the boy. "Just like his father, you say."

And if that is so, I thought, how can he be a mutant? A mutant is something new, something different, alien from the parent stem. If he is the spit an' image outside, then build and coloring bred true. And if build and coloring bred true, probably blood-type and internal organs—

Thunder boomed again on Buckhorn Mountain. And I thought, *Well, and so his father is a mutant, too.*

But Doc said, "Who was this man, Sally? I know just about everybody in these hills, but I never saw anyone to answer that description."

"His name was Bill," she said, "just like the boy's. His other name was Jones. Or he said it was."

"He lied," said Mrs. Tate. "Wasn't Jones no more than mine is. We found that out."

"How did he happen to come here?" asked Doc. "Where did he say he was from?"

"He come here," Mrs. Tate said, "driving a truck for some appliance store, Grover's I think it was, in Newhale. Said the place was just new and was making a survey of teevees around here, and offering free service on them up to five dollars, just for goodwill. So I let him look at ours, and he fussed with it for almost an hour, and didn't charge me a cent. Worked real good afterward, too. That would 'a been the end of it, I guess, only Sally was under his feet all the time and he took a shine to her. Kept coming back, and coming back, and you see what happened."

I said, "There isn't any Grover's store in Newhale. There never has been."

"We found that out," said Mrs. Tate. "When we knew the baby was coming we tried to find Mr. Jones, but it seems he'd told us a big pack of lies."

"He told me," Sally said dreamily, "where he come from."

Doc said eagerly, "Where?"

Twisting her mouth to shape the unfamiliar sounds, Sally said, "Hrylliannu."

Doc's eyes opened wide. "Where the hell is that?"

"Ain't no place," said Mrs. Tate. "Even the schoolteacher couldn't find it in the atlas. It's only another of his lies."

But Sally murmured again, "Hrylliannu. Way he said it, it sounded like the most beautiful place in the world."

The stormcloud over Buckhorn was spreading out. Its edges dimmed the sun. Lightning flicked and flared and the thunder rolled. I said, "Could I take a look at your television?"

"Why," said Mrs. Tate, "I guess so. But don't you disturb it, now. Whatever else he done, he fixed that teevee good."

"I won't disturb it," I said. I went up the sagging steps past the old man and the fat old dog. I went into the cluttered living-room, where the springs were coming out of the sofa and there was no rug on the floor, and six kids apparently slept in the old brass bed in the corner. The television set was maybe four years old, but it was the best and biggest made that year. It formed a sort of shrine at one end of the room, with a piece of red cloth laid over its top.

I took the back off and looked in. I don't know what I expected to see. It just seemed odd to me that a man would go to all the trouble of faking up a truck and tinkering with television sets for nothing. And apparently he hadn't. What I did see I didn't understand, but even to my inexpert eye it was obvious that Mr. Jones had done something quite peculiar to the wiring inside.

A totally unfamiliar component roosted on the side of the case, a little gadget not much bigger than my two thumbnails.

I replaced the back and turned the set on. As Mrs. Tate said, it worked real good. Better than it had any business to. I got a peculiar hunch that

Mr. Jones had planned it that way, so that no other serviceman would have to be called. I got the hunch that that component was important somehow to Mr. Jones.

I wondered how many other such components he had put in television sets in this area, and what they were for.

I turned off the set and went outside. Doc was still talking to Sally.

"... some further tests he wants to make," I heard him say. "I can take you and Billy back right now..."

Sally looked doubtful and was about to speak. But the decision was made for her. The boy cried out wildly, "No! No!" With the frantic strength of a young animal he twisted out of his mother's arms, dropped to the ground, and sped away into the brush so swiftly that nobody had a chance even to grab for him.

Sally smiled. "All them shiny machines and the funny smells frightened him," she said. "He don't want to go back. Isn't anything wrong with him, is there? The other doctor said he was all right."

"No," said Doc reluctantly. "Just something about the X-rays he wanted to check on. It could be important for the future. Tell you what, Sally. You talk to the boy, and I'll come back in a day or two."

"Well," she said. "All right."

Doc hesitated, and then said, "Would you want me to speak to the sheriff about finding this man? If that's his child he should pay something for its support."

A wistful look came into her eyes. "I always thought maybe if he knew about the baby—"

Mrs. Tate didn't give her time to finish. "Yes, indeed," she said. "You speak to the sheriff. Time somebody did something about this, 'fore that brat's a man grown himself."

"Well," said Doc, "we can try."

He gave a last baffled glance at the woods where the boy had disappeared, and then we said goodbye and got into the station wagon and drove away. The sky was dark overhead now, and the air was heavy with the smell of rain.

"What do you think?" I said finally.

Doc shook his head. "I'm damned if I know. Apparently the external characteristics bred true. If the others did—"

"Then the father must be a mutant too. We just push it back one generation."

"That's the simplest explanation," Doc said.

"Is there any other?"

Doc didn't answer that. We passed through Possum Creek, and it began to rain.

"What about the television set?" he asked.

I told him. "But you'd have to have Jud or one of the boys from Newhale Appliance look at it, to say what it was."

"It smells," said Doc. "It stinks, right out loud."

The bolt of lightning came so quickly and hit so close that I wasn't conscious of anything but a great flare of livid green. Doc yelled. The station wagon slewed on the road that now had a thin film of mud over it, and I saw trees rushing at us, their tops bent by a sudden wind so that they seemed to be literally leaping forward. There was no thunder. I remembered that, I don't know why. The station wagon tipped over and hit the trees. There was a crash. The door flew open and I fell out through a wet whipping tangle of branches and on down to the steep-tilted ground below. I kept on falling, right down the slope, until a gully pocket caught and held me. I lay there dazed, staring up at the station wagon that now hung over my head. I saw Doc's legs come out of it, out the open door. He was all right. He was letting himself down to the ground. And then the lightning came again.

It swallowed the station wagon and the trees and Doc in a ball of green fire, and when it went away the trees were scorched and the paint was blistered on the wrecked car, and Doc was rolling over and over down the slope, very slowly, as if he was tired and did not want to hurry. He came to rest not three feet away from me. His hair and his clothes were smoldering, but he wasn't worrying about it. He wasn't worrying about anything, any more. And for the second time there had not been any thunder, close at hand where the lightning was.

The rain came down on Doc in heavy sheets, and put the smoldering fire out.

Jim Bossert had just come from posting Doc Callendar's body. For the first time I found myself almost liking him, he looked so sick and beat-out. I pushed the bottle toward him, and he drank out of it and then lighted a cigarette and just sat there shaking.

"It was lightning," he said. "No doubt at all."

Ed Betts, the sheriff, said, "Hank still insists there was something screwy about it."

Bossert shook his head at me. "Lightning."

"Or a heavy electric charge," I said. "That comes to the same thing, doesn't it?"

"But you saw it hit, Hank."

"Twice," I said. "Twice."

We were in Bossert's office at the hospital. It was late in the afternoon, getting on for supper time. I reached for the bottle again, and Ed said quietly, "Lightning does do that, you know. In spite of the old saying."

"The first time, it missed," I said. "Just. Second time it didn't. If I hadn't been thrown clear I'd be dead too. And there wasn't any thunder."

"You were dazed," Bossert said. "The first shock stunned you."

"It was green," I said.

"Fireballs often are."

"But not lightning."

"Atmospheric freak." Ed turned to Jim Bossert. "Give him something and send him home."

Bossert nodded and got up, but I said, "No. I've got to write up a piece on Doc for tomorrow's paper. See you."

I didn't want to talk any more. I went out and got my car and drove back to town. I felt funny. Hollow, cold, with a veil over my brain so I couldn't see anything clearly or think about anything clearly. I stopped at the store and bought another bottle to see me through the night, and a feeling of cold evil was in me, and I thought of green, silent lightning, and little gim-cracks that didn't belong in a television set, and the grave wise face of a child who was not quite human. The face wavered and became the face of a man. A man from Hrylliannu.

I drove home, to the old house where nobody lives now but me. I wrote my story about Doc, and when I was through it was dark and the bottle was nearly empty. I went to bed.

I dreamed Doc Callendar called me on the phone and said, "I've found him but you'll have to hurry." And I said, "But you're dead. Don't call me, Doc, please don't." But the phone kept ringing and ringing, and after a while I woke part way up and it really was ringing. It was two-forty-nine A.M.

It was Ed Betts. "Fire up at the hospital, Hank. I thought you'd want to know. The south wing. Gotta go now."

He hung up and I began to put clothes on the leaden dummy that was me. The south wing, I thought, and sirens went whooping up Goat Hill. The south wing. That's where X-ray is. That's where the pictures of the boy's insides are on file.

What a curious coincidence, I thought.

I drove after the sirens up Goat Hill, through the clear cool night with half a moon shining silver on the ridges, and Buckhorn standing calm and serene against the stars, thinking the lofty thoughts that seem to be reserved for mountains.

The south wing of the hospital burned brightly, a very pretty orange color against the night.

I pulled off the road and parked well below the center of activity and started to walk the rest of the way. Patients were being evacuated from the main building. People ran with things in their hands. Firemen yelled and wrestled with hoses and streams of water arced over the flames. I didn't think they were going to save the south wing. I thought they would be doing well to save the hospital.

Another unit of the fire department came hooting and clanging up the road behind me. I stepped off the shoulder and as I did so I looked down to be sure of my footing. A flicker of movement on the slope about ten feet below caught my eye. Dimly, in the reflected glow of the fire, I saw the girl.

She was slim and light as a gazelle, treading her furtive way among the trees. Her hair was short and curled close to her head. In that light it was merely dark, but I knew it would be red in the sunshine, with glints of silver in it. She saw me or heard me, and she stopped for a second or two, startled,

looking up. Her eyes shone like two coppery sparks, as the eyes of an animal shine, weird in the pale oval of her face. Then she turned and ran.

I went after her. She ran fast, and I was in lousy shape. But I was thinking about Doc.

I caught her.

It was dark all around us under the trees, but the firelight and the moonlight shone together into the clearing where we were. She didn't struggle or fight me. She turned around kind of light and stiff to face me, holding herself away from me as much as she could with my hands gripping her arms.

"What do you want with me?" she said, in a breathless little voice. It was accented, and sweet as a bird's. "Let me go."

I said, "What relation are you to the boy?"

That startled her. I saw her eyes widen, and then she turned her head and looked toward the darkness under the trees. "Please let me go," she said, and I thought that some new fear had come to her.

I shook her, feeling her small arms under my hands, wanting to break them, wanting to torture her because of Doc. "How was Doc killed?" I asked her. "Tell me. Who did it, and how?"

She stared at me. "Doc?" she repeated. "I do not understand." Now she began to struggle. "Let me go! You hurt me."

"The green lightning," I said. "A man was killed by it this morning. My friend. I want to know about it."

"Killed?" she whispered. "Oh, no. No one has been killed."

"And you set that fire in the hospital, didn't you? Why? Why were those films such a threat to you? Who are you? Where—"

"Hush," she said. "Listen."

I listened. There were sounds, soft and stealthy, moving up the slope toward us.

"They're looking for me," she whispered. "Please let me go. I don't know about your friend, and the fire was—necessary. I don't want anyone hurt, and if they find you like this—"

I dragged her back into the shadows underneath the trees. There was a huge old maple there with a gnarly trunk. We stood behind it, and now I had my arm around her waist and her head pressed back against my shoulder, and my right hand over her mouth.

"Where do you come from?" I asked her, with my mouth close to her ear. "Where is Hryliannu?"

Her body stiffened. It was a nice body, very much like the boy's in some ways, delicately made but strong, and with superb coordination. In other ways it was not like the boy's at all. I was thinking of her as an enemy, but it was impossible not to think of her as a woman, too.

She said, her voice muffled under my hand, "Where did you hear that name?"

"Never mind," I said. "Just answer me."

She wouldn't.

"Where do you live now? Somewhere near here?"

She only strained to get away.

"All right," I said. "We'll go now. Back up to the hospital. The sheriff wants to see you."

I started to drag her away up the hill, and then two men came into the light of the clearing.

One was slender and curly-headed in that particular way I was beginning to know. He looked pleasantly excited, pleasantly stimulated, as though by a game in which he found enjoyment. His eyes picked up the fitful glow of the fire and shone eerily, as the girl's had.

The other man was a perfectly ordinary type. He was dark and heavy-set and tall, and his khaki pants sagged under his belly. His face was neither excited nor pleasant. It was obvious that to him this was no game. He carried a heavy automatic, and I thought he was perfectly prepared to use it.

I was afraid of him.

"... to send a dame, anyway," he was saying.

"That's your prejudice speaking," said the curly-haired man. "She was the only one to send." He gestured toward the flames. "How can you doubt it?"

"She's been caught."

"Not Vadi." He began to call softly. "Vadi? Vadi!"

The girl's lips moved under my hand. I bent to hear, and she said in the faint ghost of a whisper:

"If you want to live, let me go to them."

The big dark man said grimly, "She's been caught. We'd better do something about it, and do it quick."

He started across the clearing.

The girl's lips shaped one word. "Please!"

The dark man came with his big gun, and the curly-headed one came a little behind him, walking as a stalking cat walks, soft and springy on its toes. If I dragged the girl away they would hear me. If I stayed where I was, they would walk right onto me. Either way, I thought, I would pretty surely go to join Doc on the cold marble.

I let the girl go.

She ran out toward them. I stood stark and frozen behind the maple tree, waiting for her to turn and say the word that would betray me.

She didn't turn, and she didn't say the word. The curly-headed man put his arms around her and they talked rapidly for perhaps half a minute, and I heard her tell the dark man that she had only waited to be sure they would not be able to put the fire out too soon. Then all three turned and went quickly away among the dark trees.

I stayed where I was for a minute, breathing hard, trying to think. Then I went hunting for the sheriff.

By the time I found Ed Betts, of course, it was already too late. But he sent a car out anyway. They didn't find a trace of anyone on the road who answered the descriptions I gave.

Ed looked at me closely in the light of the dying fire, which they had

finally succeeded in bringing under control. "Don't get sore at me now, Hank," he said. "But are you real sure you saw these people?"

"I'm sure," I said. I could still, if I shut my eyes and thought about it, feel the girl's body in my arms. "Her name was Vadi. Now I want to talk to Croft."

Croft was the Fire Marshal. I watched the boys pouring water on what was left of the south wing, which was nothing more than a pile of hot embers with some pieces of wall standing near it. Jim Bossert joined us, looking exhausted and grimy. He was too tired even to curse. He just waited a little about the loss of all his fine X-ray equipment, and all his records.

"I met the girl who did it," I said. "Ed doesn't believe me."

"Girl?" said Bossert, staring.

"Girl. Apparently an expert at this sort of thing." I wondered what the curly-haired man was to her. "Was anybody hurt?"

"By the grace of God," said Bossert, "no."

"How did it start?"

"I don't know. All of a sudden I woke up and every window in the south wing was spouting flame like a volcano."

I glanced at Ed, who shrugged. "Could have been a short in that high-voltage equipment."

Bossert said, "What kind of a girl? A lunatic?"

"Another one like the boy. There was a man with her, maybe the boy's father, I don't know. The third one was just a man. Mean looking bastard with a gun. She said the fire was necessary."

"All this, just to get rid of some films?"

"It must be important to them," I said. "They already killed Doc. They tried to kill me. What's a fire?"

Ed Betts swore, his face twisted between unbelief and worry. Then Croft came up. Ed asked him, "What started the fire?"

Croft shook his head. "Too early to tell yet. Have to wait till things cool down. But I'll lay you any odds you like it was started by chemicals."

"Deliberately?"

"Could be," said Croft, and went away again.

I looked at the sky. It was almost dawn, that beautiful bleak time when the sky is neither dark nor light and the mountains are cut from black cardboard, without perspective. I said, "I'm going up to the Tates'. I'm worried about the boy."

"All right," said Ed quickly, "I'll go with you. In my car. We'll stop in town and pick up Jud. I want him to see that teevee."

"The hell with Jud," I said. "I'm in a hurry." And suddenly I was. Suddenly I was terribly afraid for that grave-faced child who was obviously the unwitting key to some secret that was important enough to justify arson and murder to those who wanted to keep it.

Ed hung right behind me. He practically shoved me into his car. It had COUNTY SHERIFF painted on its door, and I thought of Doc's station wagon

with its COUNTY HEALTH SERVICE, and it seemed like a poor omen but there was nothing I could do about it.

There was nothing I could do about stopping for Jud Spofford, either. Ed went in and routed him out of bed, taking the car keys with him. I sat smoking and looking up at Tunkhannock Ridge, watching it brighten to gold at the crest as the sun came up. Finally Jud came out grumbling and climbed in the back seat, a tall lanky young fellow in a blue coverall with *Newhale Electric Appliance Co.* embroidered in red on the pocket. His little wife watched from the doorway, holding her pink wrapper together.

We went away up Tunkhannock Ridge. There was still a black smudge of smoke above the hospital on Goat Hill. The sky over Buckhorn Mountain was clear and bright.

Sally Tate and her boy were already gone.

Mrs. Tate told us about it, while we sat on the lumpy sofa in the living room and the fat old dog watched us through the screen door, growling. Sally's sisters, or some of them at least, were in the kitchen listening.

"Never was so surprised at anything in my life," said Mrs. Tate. "Pa had just gone out to the barn with Harry and J. P.—them's the two oldest girls' husbands, you know. I and the girls was washing up after breakfast, and I heard this car drive in. Sure enough it was him. I went out on the stoop—"

"What kind of a car?" asked Ed.

"Same panel truck he was driving before, only the name was painted out. Kind of a dirty blue all over. 'Well,' I says, 'I never expected to see *your* face around here again!,' I says, and he says—"

Boiled down to reasonable length, the man had said that he had always intended to come back for Sally, and that if he had known about the boy he would have come much sooner. He had been away, he said, on business, and had only just got back and heard about Sally bringing the child in to the hospital, and knew that it must be his. He had gone up to the house, and Sally had come running out into his arms, her face all shining. Then they went in together to see the boy, and Bill Jones had fondled him and called him Son, and the boy had watched him sleepily and without affection.

"They talked together for a while, private," said Mrs. Tate, "and then Sally come and said he was going to take her away and marry her and make the boy legal, and would I help her pack. And I did, and they went away together, the three of 'em. Sally didn't know when she'd be back."

She shook her head, smoothing her hair with knotted fingers. "I just don't know," she said. "I just don't know."

"What?" I asked her. "Was there something wrong?" I knew there was, but I wanted to hear what she had to say.

"Nothing—you could lay your hand to," she said. "And Sally was so happy. She was just fit to burst. And he *was* real pleasant, real polite to me and Pa. We asked him about all them lies he told, and he said they wasn't lies at all. He said the man he was working for did plan to open a store in Newhale, but then he got sick and the plan fell through. He said his name

was Bill Jones, and showed us some cards and things to prove it. And he said Sally just misunderstood the name of the place he come from because he give it the old Spanish pronunciation."

"What did he say it was really?" Ed asked, and she looked surprised.

"Now I think of it, I guess he didn't say."

"Well, where's he going to live, with Sally?"

"He isn't settled yet. He's got two or three prospects, different places. She was so happy," said Mrs. Tate, "and I ought to be too, 'cause Lord knows I've wished often enough he would come back and get that peaky brat of his, and Sally too if she was minded. But I ain't. I ain't happy at all, and I don't know why."

"Natural reaction," said Ed Betts heartily. "You miss your daughter, and probably the boy too, more than you know."

"I've had daughters married before. It was something about this man. Something—" Mrs. Tate hesitated a long time, searching for a word. "Queer," she said at last. "Wrong. I couldn't tell you what. Like the boy, only more so. The boy has Sally in him. This one—" She made a gesture with her hands. "Oh, well, I expect I'm just looking for trouble."

"I expect so, Mrs. Tate," said Ed, "but you be sure and get in touch with me if you don't hear from Sally in a reasonable time. And now I'd like this young man to look at your teevee."

Jud, who had been sitting stiff and uncomfortable during the talking, jumped up and practically ran to the set. Mrs. Tate started to protest, but Ed said firmly, "This may be important, Mrs. Tate. Jud's a good serviceman, he won't upset anything."

"I hope not," she said. "It does run real good."

Jud turned it on and watched it for a minute. "It sure does," he said. "And in this location, too."

He took the back off and looked inside. After a minute he let go a long low whistle.

"What is it?" said Ed, going closer.

"Damnedest thing," said Jud. "Look at that wiring. He's loused up the circuits, all right—and there's a couple tubes in there like I never saw before." He was getting excited. "I'd have to tear the whole thing down to see what he's really done, but somehow he's boosted the power and the sensitivity way up. The guy must be a wizard."

Mrs. Tate said loudly, "You ain't tearing anything down, young man. You just leave it like it is."

I said, "What about that dingus on the side?"

"Frankly," said Jud, "that stops me. It's got a wire to it, but it don't seem to hitch up anywhere in the set." He turned the set off and began to poke gently around. "See here, this little hairline wire that comes down and bypasses the whole chassis? It cuts in here on the live line, so it draws power whether the set's on or not. But I don't see how it can have anything to do with the set operating."

"Well, take it out," said Ed. "We'll take it down to the shop and see whether we can make anything of it."

"Okay," said Jud, ignoring Mrs. Tate's cry of protest. He reached in and for the first time actually touched the enigmatic little unit, feeling for what held it to the side of the case.

There was a sharp pop and a small bright flare, and Jud leaped back with a howl. He put his scorched fingers in his mouth and his eyes watered. Mrs. Tate cried, "Now, you've done it, you've ruined my teevee!" There was a smell of burning on the air. The girls came running out of the kitchen and the old dog barked and clawed the screen.

One of the girls said, "What happened?"

"I don't know," Jud said. "The goddamned thing just popped like a bomb when I touched it."

There was a drift of something gray—ash or dust—and that was all. Even the hairline wire was consumed.

"It looks," I said, "as though Mr. Jones didn't want anybody else to look over his technological achievements."

Ed grunted. He looked puzzled and irresolute. "Hurt the set any?" he asked.

"Dunno," said Jud, and turned it on.

It ran as perfectly as before.

"Well," said Mrs. Tate, "thank goodness."

"Yeah," said Ed. "I guess that's all, then. What do you say, Hank? We might as well go."

I said we might as well. We climbed back into Ed's car and started—the second time for me—back down Tunkhannock Ridge.

Jud was still sucking his fingers. He wondered out loud if the funny-looking tubes in the set would explode the same way if you touched them, and I said probably. Ed didn't say anything. He was frowning deeply. I asked him what he thought about it.

"I'm trying to figure the angle," he said. "This Bill Jones. What does he get out of it? What does he *make*? On the television gag, I mean. People usually want to get paid for work like that."

Jud offered the opinion that the man was a nut. "One of these crazy guys like in the movies, always inventing things that make trouble. But I sure would like to know what he done to that set."

"Well," said Ed, "I can't see what more we can do. He did come back for the girl, and apart from that he hasn't broken any laws."

"Hasn't he?" I said, looking out the window. We were coming to the place where Doc had died. There was no sign of a storm today. Everything was bright, serene, peaceful. But I could feel the cold feeling of being watched. Someone, somewhere, knew me. He watched where I went and what I did, and decided whether or not to send the green lightning to slay me. It was a revelation, like the moments you have as a young child when you become acutely conscious of God. I began to shake. I wanted to crawl down in the

back seat and hide. Instead I sat where I was and tried to keep the naked terror from showing too much. And I watched the sky. And nothing happened.

Ed Betts didn't mention it, but he began to drive faster and faster until I thought we weren't going to need any green lightning. He didn't slow down until we hit the valley. I think he would have been glad to get rid of me, but he had to haul me all the way back up Goat Hill to get my car. When he did let me off, he said gruffly.

"I'm not going to listen to you again till you've had a good twelve hours' sleep. And I need some myself. So long."

I went home, but I didn't sleep. Not right away. I told my assistant and right-hand man, Joe Streckfoos, that the paper was all his today, and then I got on the phone. I drove the local exchange crazy, but by about five o'clock that afternoon I had the information I wanted.

I had started with a map of the area on my desk. Not just Newhale, but the whole area, with Buckhorn Mountain roughly at the center and showing the hills and valleys around its northern periphery. By five o'clock the map showed a series of red pencil dots. If you connected them together with a line they formed a sprawling, irregular, but unbroken circle drawn around Buckhorn, never exceeding a certain number of miles in distance from the peak.

Every pencil dot represented a television set that had within the last three years been serviced by a red-haired man—for free.

I looked at the map for a long time, and then I went out in the yard and looked up at Buckhorn. It seemed to me to stand very high, higher than I remembered. From flank to crest the green unbroken forest covered it. In the winter time men hunted there for bear and deer, and I knew there were a few hunting lodges, hardly more than shacks, on its lower slopes. These were not used in summer, and apart from the hunters no one ever bothered to climb those almost perpendicular sides, hanging onto the trees as onto a ladder, up to the fog and storm that plagued the summit.

There were clouds there now. It almost seemed that Buckhorn pulled them down over his head like a cowl, until the gray trailing edges hid him almost to his feet. I shivered and went inside and shut the door. I cleaned my automatic and put in a full clip. I made a sandwich and drank the last couple of drinks in last night's bottle. I laid out my boots and my rough-country pants and a khaki shirt. I set the alarm. It was still broad daylight. I went to bed.

The alarm woke me at eleven thirty. I did not turn on any lamps. I don't know why, except that I still had that naked feeling of being watched. Light enough came to me anyhow from the intermittent sulfurous flares in the sky. There was a low mutter of thunder in the west. I put the automatic in a shoulder holster under my shirt, not to hide it but because it was out of the way there. When I was dressed I went downstairs and out the back door heading for the garage.

It was quiet, the way a little town can be quiet at night. I could hear the

stream going over the stones, and the million little songs of the crickets, the peepers, and the frogs were almost stridently loud.

Then they began to stop. The frogs first, in the marshy places besides the creek. Then the crickets and the peepers. I stopped too, in the black dark beside a clump of rhododendrons my mother used to be almost tiresomely proud of. My skin turned cold and the hair bristled on the back of my neck and I heard soft padding footsteps and softer breathing on the heavy air.

Two people had waded the creek and come up into my yard.

There was a flare and a grumble in the sky and I saw them close by, standing on the grass, looking up at the unlighted house.

One of them was the girl Vadi, and she carried something in her hands. The other was the heavy-set dark man with the gun.

"It's okay," he told her. "He's sleeping. Get busy."

I slid the automatic into my palm and opened my mouth to speak, and then I heard her say:

"You won't give him a chance to get out?"

Her tone said she knew the answer to that one before she asked it. But he said with furious sarcasm:

"Why certainly, and then you can call the sheriff and explain why you burned the house down. And the hospital. Christ. I told Arnek you weren't to be trusted." He gave her a rough shove. "Get with it."

Vadi walked five careful paces away from him. Then very swiftly she threw away, in two different directions, whatever it was she carried. I heard the two things fall, rustling among grass and branches where it might take hours to find them even by daylight. She spun around. "Now," she said in a harsh defiant voice, "what are you going to do?"

There was a moment of absolute silence, so full of murder that the far-off lightning seemed feeble by comparison. Then he said:

"All right, let's get out of here."

She moved to join him, and he waited until she was quite close to him. Then he hit her. She made a small bleating sound and fell down. He started to kick her, and then I jumped out and hit him over the ear with the flat of the automatic. It was his turn to fall down.

Vadi got up on her hands and knees. She stared at me, sobbing a little with rage and pain. Blood was running from the corner of her mouth. I took the man's gun and threw it far off and it splashed in the creek. Then I got down beside the girl.

"Here," I said. "Have my handkerchief."

She took it and held it to her mouth. "You were outside here all the time," she said. She sounded almost angry.

"It just happened that way. I still owe you thanks for my life. And my house. Though you weren't so tender about the hospital."

"There was no one to be killed there. I made sure. A building one can always rebuild, but a life is different."

She looked at the unconscious man. Her eyes burned with that catlike brilliance in the lightning flares.

"I could kill him," she said, "with pleasure."

"Who is he?"

"My brother's partner." She glanced toward Buckhorn and the light went out of her eyes. Her head became bowed.

"Your brother sent you to kill me?"

"He didn't say—"

"But you knew."

"When Marlin came with me I knew."

She had begun to tremble.

"Do you make a career of arson?"

"Arson? Oh. The setting of fires. No. I am a chemist. And I wish I—"

She caught herself fiercely and would not finish.

I said, "Those things are listening devices, then."

She had to ask me what I meant. Her mind was busy with some thorny darkness of its own.

"The little gadgets your brother put in the television sets," I said. "I figured that's what they were when I saw how they were placed. A string of sentry posts all around the center of operations, little ears to catch every word of gossip, because if any of the local people get suspicious they're bound to talk about it and so give warning. He heard my calls this afternoon, didn't he? That's why he sent you. And he heard Doc and me at the Tates'. That's why—"

Moving with that uncanny swiftness of hers, she rose and ran away from me. It was like before. She ran fast, and I ran after her. She went splashing through the shallow stream and the water flew back against me, wetting my face, spattering my clothes. On the far bank I caught her, as I had before. But this time she fought me.

"Let me go," she said, and beat her hands against me. "Do you know what I've done for you? I've asked for the knife for myself. Let me go, you clumsy fool—"

I held her tighter. Her soft curls pressed against my cheek. Her body strove against me, and it was not soft but excitingly strong.

"—before I regret it," she said, and I kissed her.

It was strange, what happened then.

I've kissed girls who didn't want to be kissed, and I've kissed girls who didn't like me particularly. I've kissed a couple of the touch-me-not kind who shrink from any sort of physical contact. I've had my face slapped. But I never had a girl *withdraw* from me the way she did. It was like something closing, folding up, shutting every avenue of contact, and yet she never moved. In fact she had stopped moving entirely. She just stood with my arms around her and my lips on hers, and kind of a coldness came out of her, a rejection so total I couldn't even get mad. I was shocked, and very much puzzled, but you can't get mad at a thing that isn't personal. This was too deep for that. And suddenly I thought of the boy.

"A different breed," I said. "Worlds apart. Is that it?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "Worlds apart."

And the coldness spread through me. I stood on the bank of the stream in the warm night, the bank where I had stood ten thousand times before, boy and man, and saw the strange shining of her eyes, and I was more than cold, I was afraid. I stepped back away from her, still holding her but in a different way.

"It wasn't like this," I said, "between your brother and Sally Tate."

The girl-thing said, "My brother Arnek is a corrupt man."

"Vadi," I said. "Where is Hrylliannu?"

The girl-thing looked past my shoulder and said, "Marlin is running away."

I looked too, and it was so. The big man's head was harder than I had thought. He had got up, and I saw him blundering rapidly away along the side of my house, heading for the street.

"Well," I said, "he's gone now. You must have come in a car, didn't you?" She nodded.

"Good," I said. "It won't be challenged as soon as mine. We'll take it."

"Where are you going?" she asked, catching her breath sharply.

"Where I was going when you stopped me. Up Buckhorn."

"Oh no," she said. "No, you can't, you mustn't." She was human again, and afraid. "I saved your life, isn't that enough for you? You'll never live to climb Buckhorn and neither will I if—"

"Did Sally and the boy live to climb it?" I asked her, and she hung her head and nodded. "Then you'll see to it that we do."

"But tonight!" she said in a panic. "Not tonight!"

"What's so special about tonight?" She didn't answer, and I shook her. "What's going on up there?"

She didn't answer that, either. She said with sudden fierceness, "All right, then, come on. Climb Buckhorn and see. And when you're dying, remember that I tried to stop you."

She didn't speak again. She led me without protest to the car parked on the dirt road. It was a panel truck. By day it would have been a dirty blue.

"He's going to kill them, isn't he?" I said. "He killed Doc. You admit he wants to kill me. What's going to save Sally and the child?"

"You torture me," she said. "This is a world of torture. Go on. Go on, and get it done."

I started the panel truck. Like the television set, it worked better than it had any business to. It fled with uncanny strength and swiftness over the dirt roads toward Buckhorn, soft-sprung as a cloud, silent as a dream.

"It's a pity," I said. "Your brother has considerable genius."

She laughed. A bitter laugh. "He couldn't pass his second year of technical training. That's why he's here."

She looked at Buckhorn as though she hated the mountain, and Buckhorn, invisible behind a curtain of storm, answered her look with a sullen curse, spoken in thunder.

I stopped at the last gas station on the road and honked the owner out of bed and told him to call Sheriff Betts and tell him where I'd gone. I didn't

dare do it myself for fear Vadi would get away from me. The man was very resentful about being waked up. I hoped he would not take out his resentment by forgetting to call.

"You're pretty close to Buckhorn," I told him. "The neck you save may be your own."

I left him to ponder that, racing on toward the dark mountain in that damned queer car that made me feel like a character in one of my own bad dreams, with the girl beside me—the damned queer girl who was not quite human.

The road dropped behind us. We began to climb the knees of the mountain. Vadi told me where to turn, and the road became a track, and the track ended in the thick woods beside a rickety little lodge the size of a piano-box, with a garage behind it. The garage only looked rickety. The headlights showed up new and sturdy timbers on the inside.

I cut the motor and the lights and reached for the handbrake. Vadi must have been set on a hair-trigger waiting for that moment. I heard her move and there was a snap as though she had pulled something from a clip underneath the dashboard. The door on her side banged open.

I shouted to her to stop and sprang out of the truck to catch her. But she was already out of the garage, and she was waiting for me. Just as I came through the door there was a bolt of lightning, bright green, small and close at hand. I saw it coming. I saw her dimly in the backflash and knew that in some way she had made the lightning with a thing she held in her hand. Then it hit me and that was all.

When I came to I was all alone and the rain was falling on me just the way it had on Doc. . . .

But I wasn't dead.

I crawled around and finally managed to get up, feeling heavy and disjointed. My legs and arms flopped around as though the coordinating controls had been burned out. I stood inside the garage out of the rain, rubbing my numb joints and thinking.

All the steam had gone out of me. I didn't want to climb Buckhorn Mountain any more. It looked awfully black up there, and awfully lonesome, and God alone knew what was going on under the veil of cloud and storm that hid it. The lightning flashes—real sky-made lightning—showed me the dripping trees going right up into nothing, with the wind thrashing them, and then the following thunder cracked my eardrums. The rain hissed, and I thought, it's crazy for one man to go up there alone.

Then I thought about Sally Tate and the little red-headed kid, and I thought how Ed Betts might already be up there somewhere, plowing his way through the woods looking for me. I didn't know how long I'd been out.

I made sure I still had my gun, and I did have. I wished I had a drink, but that was hopeless. So I started out. I didn't go straight up the mountain. I figured the girl would have had time to find her brother and give him

warning, and that he might be looking for me to come that way. I angled off to the east, where I remembered a ravine that might give me some cover. I'd been up Buckhorn before, but only by daylight, with snow on the ground and a couple of friends with me, and not looking for anything more sinister than a bear.

I climbed the steep flank of the mountain, leaning almost into it, worming and floundering and pulling my way between the trees. The rain fell and soaked me. The thunder was a monstrous presence, and the lightning was a great torch that somebody kept tossing back and forth so that sometimes you could see every vein of every leaf on the tree you were fighting with, and sometimes it was so dark that you knew the sun and stars hadn't been invented yet. I lost the ravine. I only knew I was still going up. There wasn't any doubt about that. After a while the rain slacked off and almost stopped.

In an interval between crashes of thunder I heard voices.

They were thin and far away. I tried to place them, and when I thought I had them pegged I started toward them. The steep pitch of the ground fell away into a dizzying downslope and I was almost running into a sort of long shallow trough, thickly wooded, its bottom hidden from any view at all except one directly overhead. And there were lights in it, or at least a light.

I slowed down and went more carefully, hoping the storm would cover any noise I made.

The voices went on, and now I could hear another sound, the scrinch and screek of metal rubbing on metal.

I was on the clearing before I knew it. And it wasn't a clearing at all really, just one of those natural open places where the soil is too thin to support trees and runs to brush instead. It wasn't much more than ten feet across. Almost beside me were a couple of tents so cleverly hidden among the trees that you practically had to fall on them, as I did, to find them at all.

From one of them came the sleepy sobbing of a child.

In the small clearing Vadi and Arnek were watching a jointed metal mast build itself up out of a pit in the ground. The top of it was already out of sight in the cloud but it was obviously taller than the trees. The lamp was on the ground beside the pit.

The faces of Vadi and her brother were both angry, both set and obstinate. Perhaps it was their mutual fury that made them seem less human, or more unhuman, than ever, the odd bone-structure of cheek and jaw accentuated, the whole head elongated, the silver-red hair fairly bristling, the copper-colored eyes glinting with that unpleasantly catlike brilliance in the light. They had been quarreling, and they still were, but not in English. Arnek had a look like a rattlesnake.

Vadi, I thought, was frightened. She kept glancing at the tents, and in a minute the big man, Marlin, came out of one of them. He was pressing a small bandage on the side of his head, over his ear. He looked tired and wet and foul-tempered, as though he had not had an easy time getting back to base.

He started right in on Vadi, cursing her because of what she had done.

Arnek said in English, "I didn't ask her to come here, and I'm sending her home tonight."

"That's great," Marlin said. "That's a big help. We'll have to move our base anyway now."

"Maybe not," said Arnek defiantly. He watched the slim mast stretching up with a soft screeking of its joints.

"You're a fool," said Marlin, in a tone of cold and bitter contempt. "You started this mess, Arnek. You had to play around with that girl and make a kid to give the show away. Then you pull that half-cocked trick with those guys in the station wagon and you can't even do that right. You kill the one but not the other. And then *she* louses up the only chance we got left. You know how much money we're going to lose? You know how long it'll take us to find a location half as good as this? You know what I ought to do?"

Arnek's voice was sharp, but a shade uncertain. "Oh, stop bitching and get onto those scanners. All we need is another hour and then they can whistle. And there are plenty of mountains."

"Are there," said Marlin, and looked again at Vadi. "And how long do you think she'll keep her mouth shut at *your* end?"

He turned and walked back into the tent. Arnek looked uncertainly at Vadi and then fixed his attention on the mast again. Vadi's face was the color of chalk. She started once toward the tent and Arnek caught her roughly and spoke to her in whatever language they used, and she stopped.

I slid around the back of the tents to the one Marlin was in. There was a humming and whining inside. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled carefully over the wet grass between the tents, toward the front. The mast apparently made its last joint because it stopped and Arnek said something to Vadi and they bent over what seemed to be a sunken control box in the ground. I took my chance and whipped in through the tent flap.

I didn't have long to look around. The space inside was crammed with what seemed to be electronic equipment. Marlin was sitting hunched up on a stool in front of a big panel with a dozen or so little screens on it like miniature television monitors. The screens, I just had time to see, showed an assortment of views of Buckhorn and the surrounding areas, and Marlin was apparently, by remote control, rotating one by one the distant receivers that sent the images to the screens. They must have been remarkably tight-beamed, because they were not much disturbed by static. I knew now how the eye of God had watched Doc and me on Tunkhannock Ridge.

I didn't know yet how the lightning-bolts were hurled, but I was pretty sure Ed Betts would get one if his car showed up on a scanner screen, and who would be the wiser? Poor Ed hit by lightning just like old Doc, and weren't the storms something fierce this summer?

Marlin turned around and saw it wasn't Arnek. He moved faster than I would have thought possible. He scooped up the light stool he was sitting on and threw it at me, leaping sideways himself in a continuation of the

same movement. In the second in which I was getting my head out of the way of the stool he pulled a gun. He had had a spare, just as he must have had a car stashed somewhere in or near the town.

He did not quite have time to fire. I shot him twice through the body. He dropped but I didn't know if he was dead, I kicked the gun out of his hand and jumped to stand flat against the canvas wall beside the front flap, not pressing against it. The canvas was light-proof, and the small lamps over the control panels did not throw shadows.

Arnek did not come in.

After a second or two I got nervous. I could hear him shouting "Marlin! Marlin!" I ran into the narrow space behind the banks of equipment, being extremely careful how I touched anything. I did not see any power leads. It dawned on me that all this stuff had come up out of a pit in the ground like the mast and that the generator must be down there below. The floor wasn't canvas at all, but some dark gray material to which the equipment was bolted.

I got my knife out and started to slit the canvas at the back. And suddenly the inside of the tent was full of green fire. It sparked off every metal thing and jarred the gun out of my hand. It nearly knocked me out again. But I was shielded by the equipment from the full force of the shock. It flicked off again almost at once. I got the canvas cut and squirmed through it and then I put three or four shots at random into the back of the equipment just for luck.

Then I raced around the front and caught Arnek just as he was deciding not to enter the tent after all.

He had a weapon in his hand like the one Vadi had used on me. I said, "Drop it," and he hesitated, looking evil and upset. "Drop it!" I told him again, and he dropped it. "Now stand away," I said. "Walk out toward your sister, real slow, one step at a time."

He walked, and I picked up the weapon.

"Good," I said. "Now we can all relax." And I called Sally Tate, telling her it was safe to come out now.

All this time since I was where I could see her Vadi had stood with one hand over her mouth, looking up into the mist.

Sally Tate came out of the other tent. She was carrying the boy, and both their faces were pale and puffy-eyed and streaked with tears.

"It's all right now," I said. "You can go—" I was going to say "home," and then there was a sound in the sky that was not wind or thunder, that was hardly a sound at all, but more of a great sigh. The air pressed down on me and the grass was flattened as by a down-driven wind and all the branches of the trees bowed. The mist rolled, boiled, was rent, torn apart, scattered.

Something had come to rest against the top of the mast.

Arnek turned and ran to Vadi and I did not stop him. I moved closer to Sally Tate, standing with her mouth open and her eyes big and staring.

The mast began to contract downward, bringing the thing with it.

I suppose I knew then what the thing was. I just didn't want to admit it. It was cylindrical and slender, about fifty feet long, with neither wings nor jets. I watched it come slowly and gracefully down, attached by its needle-sharp nose to the magnetic grapple on top of the mast. The mast acted as automatic guide and stabilizer, dropping the ship into a slot between the trees as neatly as you would drop a slice of bread into the slot of a toaster.

And all the time the bitter breath of fear was blowing on me and little things were falling into place in my mind and I realized that I had known the answer for some time and had simply refused to see it.

A port opened in the side of the ship. And as though that was the final symbolic trigger I needed, I got the full impact of what I was seeing. Suddenly the friendly protecting sky seemed to have been torn open above me as the veiling cloud was torn, and through the rent the whole Outside poured in upon me, the black freezing spaces of the galaxy, the blaze and strangeness of a billion billion suns. I shrank beneath that vastness. I was nothing, nobody, an infinitesimal fleck in a cosmos too huge to be borne. The stars had come too close. I wanted to get down and howl and grovel like a dog.

No wonder Arnek and Vadi and the boy were queer. They were not mutants—they were not even that Earthly. They came from another world.

A little ladder had extended itself downward from the port. A man came briskly to the ground and spoke to Arnek. He resembled Arnek except that he was dressed in a single close-fitting garment of some dark stuff. Arnek pointed to me, speaking rapidly. The man turned and looked at me, his body expressing alarm. I felt childish and silly standing there with my little gun. Lone man of Earth at an incredible Thermopylae, saying, "You shall not land."

All the time Arnek and the stranger had been talking there had been other activities around the ship. A hatch in the stern had opened and now from both hatches people began to come out helter-skelter as though haste was the chief necessity. There were men and women both. They all looked human. Slightly odd, a little queer perhaps, but human. They were different types, different colors, sizes, and builds, but they all fitted in somewhere pretty close to Earthly types. They all looked a little excited, a little scared, considerably bewildered by the place in which they found themselves. Some of the women were crying. There were maybe twenty people in all.

I understood then exactly what Arnek and Marlin had been up to and it seemed so grotesquely familiar and prosaic that I began to laugh.

"Wetbacks," I said aloud. "That's what you're doing, smuggling aliens." Aliens. Yes indeed.

It did not seem so funny when I thought about it.

The stranger turned around and shouted an order. The men and women stopped, some of them still on the ladders. More voices shouted. Then those on the ladders were shoved aside and eight men in uniform jumped out, with weapons in their hands.

Sally Tate let go one wild wavering shriek. The child fell out of her arms.

He sat on the wet ground with the wind knocked out of him so he couldn't cry, blinking in shocked dismay. Sally tottered. Her big strong healthy body was sunken and collapsed, every muscle slack. She turned and made a staggering lunge for the tent and fell partly in through the doorway, crawled the rest of the way like a hurt dog going under a porch, and lay there with the flap pulled over her head.

I didn't blame her. I don't even know what obscure force kept me from joining her.

Of the eight men, five were not human. Two of them not even remotely.

I can't describe them. I can't remember what they looked like, not clearly.

Let's be honest. I don't *want* to remember.

I suppose if you were used to things like that all your life it would be different. You wouldn't think anything about it.

I was not used to things like that. I knew that I never would be, not if we ourselves achieved space-flight tomorrow. I'm too old, too set in the familiar pattern of existence that has never been broken for man since the beginning. Perhaps others are more resilient. They're welcome to it.

I picked up the boy and ran.

It came on again to rain. I ran down Buckhorn Mountain, carrying the boy in my arms. And the green lightning came after us, hunting us along the precipitous slope.

The boy had got his breath back. He asked me why we had to die. I said never mind, and kept on running.

I fell with him and rolled to the bottom of a deep gully. We were shaken. We lay in the dripping brush looking up at the lightning lancing across the night above us. After a while it stopped. I picked him up again and crept silently along the gully and onto the slope below.

And nearly got shot by Ed Betts and a scratch posse, picking their cautious way up the mountainside.

One of the men took the child out of my arms. I hung onto Ed and said inanely, "They're landing a load of wetbacks."

"Up there?"

"They've got a ship," I told him. "They're aliens, Ed. Real aliens."

I began to laugh again. I didn't want to. It just seemed such a hellishly clever play on words that I couldn't help it.

Fire bloomed suddenly in the night above us. A second later the noise of the explosion reached us.

I stopped laughing. "They must be destroying their installations. Pulling out. Marlin said they'd have to. Christ. And Sally is still up there."

I ran back up the mountain, clambering bearlike through the trees. The others followed.

There was one more explosion. Then I came back to the edge of the clearing. Ed was close behind me. I don't think any of the others were really close enough to see. There was a lot of smoke. The tents were gone. Smoking trees were slowly toppling in around the edges of a big raw crater in the ground. There was no trace of the instruments that had been in the tents.

The ship was still there. The crew, human and unhuman, were shoving the last of the passengers back into the ship. There was an altercation going on beside the forward port.

Vadi had her arm around Sally Tate. She was obviously trying to get her aboard. I thought I understood then why Sally and the boy were still alive. Probably Vadi had been insisting that her brother send them along where they wouldn't be any danger to him, and he hadn't quite had the nerve to cross her. He was looking uncertain now, and it was the officer who was making the refusal. Sally herself seemed to be in a stupor.

Vadi thrust past the officer and led Sally toward the ladder. And Sally went, willingly. I like to remember that, now, when she's gone.

I think—I hope—that Sally's all right out there. She was younger and simpler than I, she could adapt. I think she loved Bill Jones—Arnek—enough to leave her child, leave her family, leave her world, and still be happy near him.

Ed and I started to run across the clearing. Ed had not said a word. But his face was something to look at.

They saw us coming but they didn't bother to shoot at us. They seemed in a tremendous hurry. Vadi screamed something, and I was sure it was in English and a warning to me, but I couldn't understand it. Then she was gone inside the ship and so were Arnek and Sally and the officer and crewmen, and the ladders went up and the ports shut.

The mooring mast began to rise and so did the ship, and the trees were bent with the force of its rising.

I knew then what the warning was.

I grabbed Ed bodily and hauled him back. The ship didn't have to be very high. Only above the trees. I hauled him as far as blind instinct told me I could go and then I yelled, "Get down! Get down!" to everybody within earshot and made frantic motions. It all took possibly thirty seconds. Ed understood and we flopped and hugged the ground.

The mast blew.

Dirt, rocks, pieces of tree rained down around us. The shock wave pounded our ears. A few moments later, derisive and powerful, a long thin whistling scream tore upward across the sky, and faded, and was gone.

We got up after a while and collected the muddy and startled posse and went to look at what was left of the clearing. There was nothing. Sally Tate was gone as though she had never existed. There was no shred of anything left to prove that what Ed and I had seen was real.

We made up a story, about a big helicopter and an alien racket. It wasn't too good a story, but it was better than the truth. Afterward, when we were calmer, Ed and I tried to figure it out for ourselves. How it was done, I mean, and why.

The "how" was easy enough, given the necessary technology. Pick a remote but not too inconveniently isolated spot, like the top of Buckhorn Mountain. Set up your secret installation—a simple one, so compact and carefully hidden that hunters could walk right over it and never guess it

was there when it was not in use. On nights when conditions are right—that is to say, when the possibility of being observed is nearest to zero—run your cargo in and land it. We figured that the ship we saw wasn't big enough to transport that many people very far. We figured it was a landing-craft, ferrying the passengers down from a much bigger mother-ship way beyond the sky.

A star-ship. It sounded ridiculous when you said it. But we had seen the members of the crew. It is generally acknowledged by nearly everybody now that there is no intelligent life of any terrestrial sort on the other planets of our own system. So they had to come from farther out.

Why? That was a tougher one to solve. We could only guess at it.

"There must be a hell of a big civilization out there," said Ed, "to build the ships and travel in them. They obviously know we're here."

Uneasy thought.

"Why haven't they spoken to us?" he wondered. "Let us in on it too."

"I suppose," I said, "they're waiting for us to develop space-flight on our own. Maybe it's a kind of test you have to pass to get in on their civilization. Or maybe they figure we're so backward they don't want to have anything to do with us, all our wars and all. Or both. Pick your own reason."

"Okay," said Ed. "But why dump their people on us like that? And how come Marlin, one of our own people, was in on it?"

"There *are* Earthmen who'll do anything for money," I said. "Like Marlin. It'd not be too hard to contact men like him, use them as local agents."

"As for why they dump their people on us," I went on, "it probably isn't legal, where they came from. Remember what Marlin said about Vadi? *How long will she keep her mouth shut at your end?* My guess is her brother was a failure at home and got into a dirty racket, and she was trying to get him out of it. There must be other worlds like Earth, too, or the racket wouldn't be financially sound. Not enough volume."

"But the wetbacks," Ed said. "Were they failures, too? People who couldn't compete in the kind of a society they must have? And how the hell many do you suppose they've run in on us already?"

I've wondered about that myself. How many aliens have Marlin, and probably others like him, taken off the star-boats and dressed and instructed and furnished with false papers, in return doubtless for all the valuables the poor devils had? How many of the people you see around you every day, the anonymous people that just look a little odd somehow, the people about whom you think briefly that they don't even look human—the queer ones you notice and then forget—how many of them *aren't* human at all in the sense that we understand that word?

Like the boy.

Sally Tate's family obviously didn't want him back. So I had myself appointed his legal guardian, and we get on fine together. He's a bright kid. His father may have been a failure in his own world, but on ours the half-bred child has an I.Q. that would frighten you. He's also a good youngster. I think he takes after his aunt.

I've thought of getting married since then, just to make a better home for the boy, and to fill up a void in my own life I'm beginning to feel. But I haven't quite done it yet. I keep thinking maybe Vadi will come back some day, walking with swift grace down the side of Buckhorn Mountain. I do not think it is likely but I can't quite put it out of my mind. I remember the cold revulsion that there was between us, and then I wonder if that feeling would go on, or whether you couldn't get used to that idea of differentness in time.

The trouble is, I guess, that Vadi kind of spoiled me for the general run of women.

I wonder what her life is like in Hryliannu, and where it is. Sometimes on the bitter frosty nights when the sky is diamond-clear and the Milky Way glitters like the mouth of hell across it, I look up at the stars and wonder which one is hers. And old Buckhorn sits black and silent in the north, and the deep wounds on his shoulder are healing into grassy scars. He says nothing. Even the thunder now has a hollow sound. It is merely thunder.

But, as Arnek said, there are plenty of mountains.



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THE LAST ELEMENT

a story in the Ray Bradbury tradition and imbued with the author's own background of burning deserts and gaunt Inca remains crouching on Andean peaks—Chile

GREAT luminous areas, green, red and blue, pierced the planet. They were most abundant between the tropics, gradually diminishing toward the poles, resembling ulcers on a dark and wrinkled skin. The old world was a corpse. The sun, in the throes of agony, sent forth blood-red rays.

"Twenty-five minutes to land, captain! Radiation has diminished. It comes particularly from those swamps."

"What's the difference, Juan? The trip is a success, isn't it?"

"I repeat my suggestion, captain: it would be better to remain in orbit for a couple of days, until we can determine exactly the behavior of this radioactivity. Its fitfulness is suspicious."

"No. We have no time for that. Element Z is sure to be found here in its natural state and we need it to overcome the rebels. We've got to hurry."

The land, as it came nearer, was stained red by the dying sun. No signs of life, either vegetable or animal. Ancient mountain ranges worn away by millions of years' erosion. Wide plains and enormous rocky formations, these last seen in low rings around the radiant zones. Clouds of white gas floated over the landscape, stretching in long wisps close to the ground and imperceptibly creeping over it.

"Will the Earth end this way, Juan?"

"I wonder!"

"What's the matter, Juan?"

"Premonitions, captain. There's something down there that makes me nervous. I wonder what happened there?"

"We'll soon find out. As to your premonitions, don't trust them. They'll deceive you most of the time. On the other hand, our instruments are infallible. We can trust *them*!"

The rocket, like an inverted wineglass, raised its pointed prow to the sky.

To the North could be seen the first slopes of a rounded mountain range; behind it, that strange, many-colored glow.

"Max and Juan! Take the tractor and go look at that swamp."

Max went ahead. His heavy boots sank at every step leaving deep prints which disappeared in the dark. The ground was now soft and slippery, making the ascent more difficult. Night came but not darkness, for the radiation glow, far and near, provided light enough to see by. A sort of ghostly halo surrounded the stars.

"The sky is different, but it looks familiar somehow, don't you think so, Max?"

He pointed to a constellation in the shape of a cross, made up of eight stars of first magnitude.

The top of the hill. At their feet they saw a blue sandy waste, its surface slightly waved, entirely surrounded by high cliffs. The substance blazed and flickered in some silent activity going on under the explorers' eyes. In spite of its coloring and peculiar vitality, the place lacked beauty.

"I've a feeling we're being watched, Juan! Don't you think the light has increased?"

Behind the glass of their helmets both men could see each other's faces in the bluish glow.

"Yes, that's true. Of course it may only be an optical illusion due to the sunset."

"Look!"

Suddenly the wavy surface flattened itself out and turned into a smooth blue plain, quietly glimmering. At the same time the emanations changed into a mist which shimmered like hot air over a road in the sun, as though the vast expanse had begun to steam.

"It's changed, Juan, hasn't it?"

"Yes. Let's go. I don't like this at all."

They turned back. Max gave a last look at the swamp. Waterspouts beginning to whirl were now scattered over the whole plain.

"Juan, I'm sure the place changed when we arrived. As if it had noticed our presence."

Behind them, the light was diminishing rapidly.

The captain listened to the two men in silence.

"Most of the radiations are unknown, captain. I maintain my opinion: let's take off and observe the planet from space."

"No, Juan. In two days we'll have completed our exploration, then we'll take off. To lose a few hours might prove fatal. The outcome of the war depends on us."

The planet slept peacefully. A dull twilight allowed some details to be seen within a reduced radius.

"Are you sure, Pierre? You weren't daydreaming?"

"You know I'm not in the habit of daydreaming, captain. I saw two

figures that looked like Juan and Max. They were walking toward the swamp. You see that the light has increased. I couldn't be mistaken."

Midnight.

"D'you think there are people here, captain?"

"Who could live in this atmosphere?"

"Some creature adapted to the place. Maybe—"

"Well?"

"Well, it's possible some other expedition has got here before us. The rebels, for instance."

"That's impossible, Joe! No one knew our destination."

The captain went to the observation window. A purplish light illuminated the scene. It lit up the hills about five hundred yards away from the rocket, which marked the end of the hollow where they had landed and also the beginning of the swamp.

"Joe! Pierre! Take the tractor and make a quick inspection. I still believe yours was a vision. But we must make sure."

The light was intense. Far off, the different shades combined to form a fantastic color scheme. The tractor started in a straight line to the swamp.

"Why didn't you wake us at once?"

"I didn't know what to do, Joe. I only came to my senses when I found that no one had left the rocket. Here's a way up!"

He drove the tractor toward an opening in the hillside. The bottom of the pass, though irregular and swampy, was as wide as a sidewalk and would let the tractor climb easily.

"No wonder I thought Max and Juan were hiding something."

The two men stared at the peculiar city. The walls and roofs of the low, symmetrical buildings sparkled softly. The wide, well-kept streets seemed to be built of the same material as the houses. There was no rubble to be seen.

"Have you found anything?"

Pierre gestured to Joe to be quiet.

"Nothing yet, captain."

"I'm convinced that you had a nightmare, Pierre." The captain's voice sounded harshly in their earphones.

"Why did you lie?" Joe asked, after a moment.

"For a very simple reason. Juan and Max must have seen the same thing we have. But they kept quiet about it. Why? We'll do no harm by keeping the secret a few minutes more, will we?"

The men got out of the tractor and went nearer.

"Funny we didn't notice it from the air!"

"The buildings are the same color as the sand. They don't stand out. The radiation shimmer makes them invisible from the air."

"I'm going to take a look at that city. Wait here for me in case anything happens."

He began to climb down nimbly, clinging to the rocks. At his feet, a wide

smooth street ended at the cliffside. The man put his foot out and placed it on the pavement.

"It's as solid as concrete, Joe."

He started up the street between the houses.

"The radiation is tremendous. These streets are a real labyrinth, Joe. The houses have no openings or windows of any kind. What use could they be?"

Pierre's figure glowed the same as the city itself. He was already half a block away, close to a building which rose at the end of the avenue.

"What's the matter?"

"Wait a minute—There are words engraved on the metal, Joe! It's a name. My God!"

Joe had no time to answer. The scene suddenly quivered like jelly. The buildings burst into bubbles, in a twinkling the landscape flattened out into a furiously boiling lake. There was a soundless bubbling. The light increased blindingly and diminished at once. At Joe's feet appeared a flat smooth surface, light blue in color, slowly dying out.

"Joe! Pierre! What's happening? What do those lights mean? Answer me!"

Joe was still there, clinging to a rock, his eyes fixed on the swamp. Max and Juan had to separate Joe's frozen fingers to carry him to the tractor. Sixty feet down, the swamp glimmered. Pierre did not appear.

As they returned, the men noticed that the general luminosity died down considerably. Once more night reigned.

In the space ship Joe's body was subjected to a detailed examination. His eyes were closed and he was placed in the freezer, where he would remain until they returned to Earth.

The three men met in the navigation cabin.

"Why did they stop reporting to us? They were silent for at least ten minutes before Joe's final cry."

"Joe saw something," commented the captain somberly. "Maybe he saw Pierre die."

The planet, asleep now, sent out a soft glimmering which the men could see from the windows.

"He must have fallen into the swamp, captain. Joe was at the edge of the cliff. Maybe Pierre got too close to the edge and fell in."

"And the figures that Pierre saw?"

The captain could not control a sigh.

"That's something we'll never know, Max."

The captain couldn't sleep. He went to the navigation cabin and looked out. The light had increased again. The surroundings were visible to a considerable distance. There were worse places, undoubtedly. Mercury, for one. There you found lakes of steaming lead, hot gases sweeping rocky plains, and on the side which the sun's rays never reached the temperature was close to absolute zero. But, in spite of all that, it had an innocent look.

But here . . . The star was dying. Where does a world's evolution end? When does its sun go out? Or does evolution continue, developing and

adjusting itself to new climatic conditions? On Earth itself, man had no reason to believe that he would be the last created being. Any catastrophe could put an end to his existence: the very war which was imminent and which had caused the present expedition in search of new elements of destruction.

The captain was visibly agitated . . . *The effects of atomic war!* After a lapse of centuries radioactivity could form a malignant silt, shapeless but forever clinging to the face of its planet. Those strange, life-endowed pustules . . . The remains of the lost race could well be amalgamated there. A new form of life. Or death. A cancer of the planets. The last element. That was it: element Z. The captain felt suddenly calm. The expedition's objective was foremost again. The search for unknown element Z, the existence of which was only the fruit of calculation and conjecture. The theory was that its radiations could be transmitted through any protective substance and that it disintegrated quickly and silently. It was believed to be able to cover a surface of millions of square miles in twenty-four hours, exterminating all living beings.

He was looking at the top of a hill when he saw a human figure emerge. The captain focused his televisior: there was Pierre in his space suit; he saw him wave his arms; his knees bent and he fell to the ground.

"He's less than five hundred yards away, Max. His radio must be out of order. Go and bring him back by yourself. Don't go near the swamp! Understand? Don't even look at it!"

Max stopped next to the group of rocks where Joe was found.

"A hundred and fifty yards to your left, Max!"

"I can't go on with the tractor, captain. I'm leaving it here."

The ground was rocky but Max managed to advance rapidly. Sometimes a rock would hide the rocket from him. Other times he had to slip between masses of granite set close together.

"There's Pierre, captain! He's dragging his feet. I'm going after him."

"Hurry, Max. Maybe he's crazy, like Joe. Be careful."

Pierre disappeared near the hill. No cracks or caves could be seen where Pierre might have gone in. Max searched the ground with his torch: an opening began at the foot of the hill and sank into the ground with a slight downward slope.

"It's like a tunnel, captain."

"Go on, Max. Try the ground at every step before you advance."

The passage widened out at about forty yards from the entrance. Its solid slippery floor suggested an artificial origin. Max had to be most careful not to slip.

"No footprints, captain. The floor is covered with a thin coating of silt. This must have been a mine or a shelter."

Now and again the tunnel turned. Sometimes it sloped downward and sometimes it rose, always gradually, so that it was impossible to calculate

its level with regard to the top. After having advanced a thousand yards Max calculated that he must be somewhere near the landing place.

All of a sudden the man felt overcome by an unexpected sense of peace and quiet. Gone was the tension that had not left him since he began to follow Pierre. He went forward again with unlooked for enthusiasm and contentment. A hundred yards ahead a pale light from outside entered the tunnel.

"The tunnel is ending, captain."

"What about Pierre?"

"Nothing yet. But I'm sure I'm going to find him."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Premonition."

"Stop having premonitions! What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. I feel very well. It's something new."

"Come back, Max! Do you understand? Come back at once!"

"Don't shout so loud, captain! You make me deaf. There's Pierre!"

"Pierre?"

"Yes . . . but . . . I'm back where I started from!"

"What's that? What do you mean?"

"Ha! Ha! Old Pierre . . . He's walking toward the rocket! He's less than fifty yards away, captain. He's nearing the rocket from behind. D'you understand? Look North. I'm coming out of the tunnel. I can see Pierre's footprints in the sand—"

A howl was heard.

"Stop, Max! Nobody's coming. To the North there's only a plain three miles long. Go back! It's an order!"

"But . . . I'm only a hundred yards from the rocket. Pierre is waiting for me right next to it. He's waving to me! My God! The ground's sinking!"

The captain followed Max's course. The tunnel's mouth opened on a level with the swamp which stretched as far as the eye could see, quiet and glimmering.

"Juan: Max saw a mirage. Do you notice how the glow has faded? As soon as it's light we'll load the rocket and take off."

"Let's not wait any more, captain. Come back and let's return at once!"

"Are you crazy, Juan? What do you think we've come for? A pleasure trip? Or do you think the death of two men will make me return empty-handed?"

"And the visions? How do you explain them?"

"Heaven knows! Some optical disturbance caused by the changing luminosity."

The captain fell silent. All at once the swamp had lost its wavy appearance; its glowing surface turned dull and took on the appearance and solidity of concrete. At the man's feet there was now a huge airfield lit by a radiance like moonlight. On the left rose a lofty control tower. In the center of the

vision, proud and shining, rose a space ship ready to take flight. The captain stifled a cry: on the ship's side could be seen its identification number.

Five uniformed figures emerged, one by one, from a trap door on the left. The captain recognized himself as the one heading the group. One after the other he recognized Juan, Joe, Max and Pierre walking quickly toward the rocket.

One by one—himself at the end—they disappeared inside the space ship. There could be no doubt about it; he was watching the take-off of his own rocket when it went out into interstellar space some time back. Lights changed at the control tower. Once again he heard the flight chief's hard dry voice counting the seconds. Instinctively he stepped back when the count ended.

Waves of fire and smoke appeared under the ship, reaching almost as far as the captain. Slowly it began to rise, supported by ten fiery columns which hit the ground in clouds of sparks. He thought he could hear the furious roar of the atom disintegrated in the combustion chamber to set free one megaton of domesticated energy.

The vision changed: the same place now under a midday sun. A rocket was coming down on the same spot of the recent take-off. He recognized his own rocket, although badly battered. A man got out and was lost in the crowd before the captain could recognize him. Of one thing he was certain: it wasn't himself.

Suddenly the onlookers became excited: several arms pointed skywards. The crowd fled precipitately. Only then did he recognize the pilot as he ran past, not three yards away, looking upwards in horror. It was Juan.

Another rocket was coming down on a long, fantastically shaped tongue of fire. It resembled his own, although no identification signs could be seen on its shining side. On landing it shivered all over as if it were not entirely solid. It touched the ground raising a huge phosphorescent wave, blue in color, which clouded the scene like a mist. Before the man's feverish gaze the rocket began to crumble rapidly; its sides turned to jelly and slid to the ground like a shining waterfall. Soon it was nothing but a shapeless mound of radioactive matter speedily flowing over the rocketdrome. The first rocket exploded and crumbled away. The control tower shook and dissolved like a snowman under the sun. Night fell.

At the captain's feet stretched a furiously boiling expanse. It bubbled in silence for several seconds; it quieted down gradually and returned to its usual state of a softly glistening sandy waste.

The man gave a hoarse cry.

"That . . . that's element Z!" he stammered. Then he shouted hoarsely: "Juan! Juan!"

Nobody answered.

"Juan! Juan! What's wrong? Is the radio out of order?"

He tried the transmitter with nervous fingers. No use. He thought he felt a thousand eyes looking at him. He even imagined he heard a low sarcastic laugh from the swamp. He started to run back through the tunnel.

"No. We won't return. They'd follow us. If we go back the Earth will be turned into a planet like this one. Men's spirits will remain chained to radioactive quicksands, to form the last element. I must sacrifice myself. And Juan. I'll lock him up in his cabin and I'll steer the rocket to the other end of the universe."

He had to climb. He slipped at every step of that endless tunnel. What could it have been before? Doubtless the race that peopled the planet in the past had searched for minerals like men did: tearing the vitals of the earth to quench their thirst for riches and power.

His heart was hammering. His temples beat, a bitter taste was on his tongue. At last he was in the open. He stopped to regain his breath. East, the sky was red. The dying sun was on the point of rising. He had been over two hours in the tunnel! Before he could master his amazement he saw a red light emerge from the landing field. A flame flowing powerfully under a well-known object.

"God! The rocket! Juan! Wait for me!" He ran wildly on, raising his arms skywards.

"Juan!"

The rocket had gathered speed. The sky was turning red. Against it you could hardly see the jet flames which carried the rocket back to earth. Juan hadn't waited any more. Terrified by the solitude, the captain's silence and the intense luminosity of the swamp, he had fled.

The captain ran this way and that. He climbed, he fell and rose again with powerful bursts of energy. At last, exhausted and defeated, he went to lean on some low black rocks. Behind them stretched the swamp. The sun's scarlet light, mixed with the bluish glow, produced a ghostly effect.

The captain, hoarsely panting, saw that a familiar shape began to rise from the swamp in a furious swirl of radiant particles. It was a rocket. Below it there was a storm of blue bubbles and waves. It rose, lurching grotesquely. Behind it, the blood-red globe of the sun emerged slowly. Its rays touched the sides of the ascending ship.

The captain, his mouth, eyes and skin dry, saw that it was gathering speed with extraordinary swiftness. His expert gaze saw it set a Southeasterly course. It was about to enter the escape orbit. With a very few seconds' delay it had started in pursuit of Juan.

And it carried within it the coveted element.



Gordon R. Dickson

IT had been sixteen years, and here Jimmy was dead. Holter Lauren sat with the body in his arms in the bare living room of the small, two-room house of the Daclan sea-farm. Outside, the cold waves of the globe-wide Daclan ocean beat like heavy, grey ghosts on the rocky slopes below the house. Jimmy's fishing boat, laden with its nets, rocked at the dock's end.

Jimmy would be over thirty, now, Holter thought. But under the stubble of blond beard, the dead face was still youthful . . . relaxed and innocent, gentle. Jimmy had not bled much—where the slim curve of the net-hook entered his body below the left shoulder blade, the heavy coat of coarse sisal fiber was marked by only a small stain of red.

It had happened with such impossible swiftness.

Jimmy, Holter had been going to say, remember when they shipped us back from the Belt stars? Remember when we were orphans together, after an epidemic that killed off the grown people on Belt Four? How's it been with you since, Jimmy? What friends and neighbors you got, Jimmy boy? How's Dacla as a place to call home? But he never had a chance to say any of it. Holter was rich now, a ship-hopper, a perambulating tourist who wandered where his whims took him. They had brought him to Dacla now, after sixteen years—hours too late.

Holter Lauren had roamed space for sixteen years, and he had a tough hide and a tough soul.

On Dacla, however, he was scarred for life by the look on the face of a girl . . .

friend
for
life

He had come directly here from the ship. He had waited in this cold little room until Jimmy's fishing boat came into the dock. He'd heard Jimmy's uncertain footsteps up the rocky walk to the house, and seen the front door open.

"Hi, Jimmy," Holter had said, "long time no see, kid."

And Jimmy had looked at him and coughed a little blood. Then he fell forward into Holter's arms and died, with nine centimeters of steel and the plastic handle of a net-hook sticking out of his back.

Holter Lauren had never known anything could touch a man like this. Rich man, poor man, beggar-man, thief, Holter had been all of those. But always on the bright, slick surface of life. Now he crouched like a dog above another dead dog, with a dog's dumb, savage misery in his heart. Sixteen years he had followed the dark angel of his own dark spirit until it no longer had anything more to give him. So he had come back to what might have been his bright angel, one day too late.

There was a small sound beyond the front door. Sudden new purpose flamed up in Holter. He reached to the net-hook in Jimmy's back and with easy strength drew it gently out. Dark and slim and hard, he moved noiselessly to the wall alongside the door and flattened himself out. The stained net-hook twitched in his hand.

There was a shuffle on the doorstep, a hesitant sound. Then, slowly, the door began to open. There was a movement—

Holter leaped. A flurry of action, and he slammed a slight form against the inside wall; and held it there, the needle point of the net-hook centimeters from a throat. A rabbit face with thin strands of black straggling beard gabbled in terror at him.

"Who're you?" whispered Holter.

"Dummy . . . don't hurt Dummy . . . no, no, please don't hurt Dummy . . ."

Slowly, but keeping the net-hook close, Holter released his grip. The obvious half-wit sagged against the wall. His eyes went to the body of Jimmy, and he began to cry.

"Oh no . . . oh no . . . oh no . . . oh—"

Holter dropped the hook to lift both hands and fit them around the narrow neck. The idiot reiteration died and for a minute something like intelligence gleamed in the black, vacant eyes.

"Don't know you—" whispered Dummy through the strangling hands.

Holter forced himself to let go and step back.

"I'm Jimmy's friend," he said. "Do you know what happened? Tell me!"

"No. Dummy don't know. Jimmy say stay home. Dummy couldn't go today in boat. Jimmy come home with hook in back. Oh no . . . oh no—"

"Shut up!" said Holter. The singsong voice cut off as if a switch had been snapped. Holter lifted the body of Jimmy with smooth strength.

"Where you take my Jimmy?" whimpered the half-wit, scrambling after him.

"To the police," said Holter.

The Daclan police lieutenant, an older man who wore his sisal-cloth uniform carelessly, but neatly, sat on the corner of his desk.

"What are you going to do first?" asked Holter.

"Don't worry," said the lieutenant. His grey eyes under faded brows considered Holter. "We'll check into it."

"Check into it?" Behind Holter, standing half-crouched in a corner, the half-wit, Dummy, stirred. "Damn it!" burst out Holter. "This is murder!"

The lieutenant drew a long breath.

"Look, Mr. Lauren," he said. "You're a tourist. No offense—but you don't know Daclan. We're a young world, geologically as well as colonially. Our land is rock and we make our living from the sea. We're over-worked and under-populated." He stood up from the desk. "I'll do what I can."

Holter stood up also. With the fury in him, he felt taller even than he was.

"What did you have against Jimmy?" he asked softly.

"Have against him?" echoed the inspector. "There wasn't anyone I liked better than Jimmy. Everybody liked him—loved him. You come here after all this time and ask me what I had against him. How good a friend were you, these last sixteen years?"

Holter turned on his heel and walked out, down concrete corridors and into the cloud-broken sunlight of the street. He stopped, undecided; and in that moment he heard the hesitant scurry of feet behind him. He turned and saw the half-wit.

"Come here," Holter said.

The little man sidled closer.

"All right," said Holter, impatiently, "I won't hurt you. Now listen. Who was Jimmy's closest friend?"

Dummy didn't understand, put his thumb in his mouth to bite it.

"How about girl friends? A girl—did Jimmy have a girl?"

Dummy's thin face lit up. "Mincy!" he cried; and clapped his hands. "Mincy!"

Dummy led him by narrow, pedestrian streets between the blocky concrete buildings of the business section down to the harbor, past countless wharves and many ships until they came at last to a cordage warehouse. In the interior, the dim outlines of men at work moved to and fro; on the dock itself, a young girl in rough work pants and shirt sat on a coil of rope cable, gazing toward the sea. As soon as he caught sight of her, Dummy gave a little whimper, ran ahead and knelt down beside her. He hid his face in her lap and she put one hand on his head and stroked it absently. She did not look away from the sea.

Holter hesitated, then approached slowly. The hand which stroked Dummy's tangled black hair was brown and hard, with short, blunted nails; her hair was yellow and alive and her face beautiful with fine, strong bones. She had not been crying but her face was stony.

"I see you've heard," said Holter. . . . "I'm an old friend of his."

"They were all his friends," she said. After a moment she added, "Would you leave me alone, please. I'd like to be alone."

"I want to do something about it!" Holter broke out, angrily. "That lieutenant I talked to—he's worse than nothing. I want to find the man who did it."

"You can't do anything," she said, expressionlessly. "You're a tourist."

"What's that got to do with it?" he demanded. "He was the only—the best friend I ever had. I'm going to get the man that did it. You can give me a lead."

"Please," she said. "Go away."

"What's wrong with you?" he shouted at her. "You're as bad as the lieutenant. Weren't you his girl?"

"His girl?" she said. "I was his wife."

"His wife—" Holter stared at her and the mounds of sisal cable on the dock. "What are you doing here? The sea-farm—"

"That was his work. This was mine." Her voice had the eternal greyness of the sea in it. "I have to get back to work soon. Will you go now?" She spoke with infinite weariness.

Holter stood like a wild animal, baffled by its chains, for a second. Then he turned away, his fists clenched.

Dummy clung to the woman's knees. She patted him gently.

"Go with him, Dummy," she said. Reluctantly, the little man got to his feet.

For the first few moments, Holter strode along automatically, without plan. Then he saw a knot of men ahead of him, congregated on a dock above one of the little fishing boats. When he reached the group, Holter saw that a stretcher was just being lifted by block and tackle from the low deck of the boat.

"Easy," said one of the men on the dock, catching at one end of the stretcher. "Easy, don't jolt him now."

They unhooked the stretcher and four men took the handles of it. Holter could see that it held a boy of about sixteen. He seemed to be unconscious; his eyes were closed and his face white. But his head turned from side to side as he was carried past and suddenly a low moan seemed to bubble from his lips. The whole right side of his body was stained with blood.

"For God's sake!" said Holter. "Why don't they give him a shot of morphine?"

"What morphine?" said the man beside him and turned. He recognized Holter as a tourist and his lips spread in a humorless grin. "Sure, morphine," he said. "And some wire cable that wouldn't have parted and let the sheave block drop on him in the first place." He spat on the dock.

Holter held his anger capped within him by force of will.

"Say," he said. "Do you know Jimmy Molloy?"

The other looked up at him with new curiosity. "Sure. Sure, I know Jimmy. What about him?"

"He's dead," said Holter.

The wind-toughened face stretched with surprise. "Jimmy? No!" He stared at Holter.

"He came home with a net-hook in his back."

"Net-hook—" the other's eyes narrowed. "Today? That huncher Bollen, huh?"

"I don't know," said Holter, as calmly as he could. "Was it?"

They eyed each other for a waiting moment; and, slowly, a curtain seemed to draw across the eyes of the other man.

"I wouldn't know," he said, and turned away. Holter reached out and caught his arm and swung him back.

The man looked down at Holter's hand on his arm.

"That's no good," he said.

There was a shifting of feet on the planks around them; and Holter looked up to see himself surrounded by a ring of weather-scarred faces. They said nothing, only waited; and after a second he let go. He turned away and went across the dock to the landward stairs and climbed them to the street. He looked back. Dummy was following.

Holter felt weary with the weariness of a great, frustrated rage. Down the street was a bar. He went toward it, turned in, and seated himself on a stool at the narrow, empty counter. The bartender came gliding down behind the bar to him—gliding sideways.

Holter glanced over the bar, saw that the bartender was legless, and sitting on a sliding platform that ran on two rails.

"What for you?" asked the bartender.

"Anything," Holter said. "Booze—anything." He looked at Dummy. "And whatever he wants."

"Coffee!" crowed Dummy, excitedly. "Hot coffee!"

Holter sipped his drink and felt it bite and burn on his tongue.

"Pretty busy on the docks this time of year," he said.

The bartender flushed.

"Go to hell!" he said.

Holter stared at him. "What's the matter with you?" he said.

The bartender grunted. "Forget it," he said. "You're a tourist. You don't know any better. If I had two good legs I'd be out there—nobody loafs on this world unless they have to."

"All right," Holter swallowed his own gall. "I'm sorry. Maybe you'll tell me why."

The bartender reached for a barcloth.

"Know anything about economics?" he said. "This here's no industrial world. There's no surpluses. We live on a subsistence level, and that's all. We got to work that hard to stay alive, day by day."

"I still don't get it," said Holter, watching him. "Why do things the hard way? Why weave cloth out of vegetable fibers? Why rope cable? Why don't you set up a plastics plant and a steel industry?"

"Who's to do it?" the bartender swept the cloth in sharp circles. "Food's

the main thing. Food comes from the sea. To put people on plastics and steel we'd have to take them off the boats. Take them off the fishing boats and there's not enough food coming in. Then we starve. You can bring in only a few emergency things by ship."

There was a moment's silence. Dummy sucked at his cup.

"All right," said Holter. "I said I was sorry."

The bartender made a half-ashamed gesture.

"Forget it. I sit here all alone all day and I get to feeling—ah, forget it."

"Sure," said Holter. He leaned a little forward over the bar. "Do you know a man named Bollen?" he asked.

The bartender's head came up.

"Bollen? You mean Tige Bollen? Yeah, I know him."

"Where would I find him?"

"Up on the sisal farms, this time of year," answered the bartender. "They're harvesting, now. He works on Farm One Eighty-nine."

"Know him very well?"

"I know him." He reached out with the barcloth. "He's a tough huncher, that motherson."

"That's what I hear," said Holter. "I heard he's liable to use a net-hook."

"He'll use a net-hook. He'll use anything," replied the bartender, dispassionately, as if considering the instincts of some remote animal. "He's got plenty of guts; but if he can't take you with fists and feet, he'll take you with anything that's handy."

"He took Jimmy Molloy," said Holter, harshly.

"Jimmy?"

"He's dead," said Holter. "With a net-hook in his back."

The barcloth was stopped now.

"I suppose," said Holter, "you don't give a damn, either."

"Want another drink?" asked the bartender.

"What's wrong with you?" grated Holter. "All of you? You scared of something? Everybody claims they liked Jimmy, but nobody'll move a finger after this bastard that killed him."

"You better pay me for what you got," said the bartender. "That'll be twenty-two fifty."

"For that rot-gut you sold me?" Holter said. "Fleece the tourist, eh?"

"The rot-gut's fifty cents," said the bartender. "The twenty-two's for the coffee. I thought you knew what the price was here when Dummy ordered it."

Holter threw down a twenty-five-credit note and walked away.

Out on the street, he turned to Dummy, who shrank from him.

"It's all right," said Holter, sharply. "I'm not mad at you. Listen, do you know this Tige Bollen?"

Dummy nodded, huddling against the wall.

"Good," said Holter. "You come along. I want you to point him out to me."

They went back to the transportation center next to the spaceport.

"Sorry," the one man on duty told Holter. "All the rentals are out."

"How about those?" said Holter; and pointed to a row of the light craft parked under a weather overhang.

The thin face of the other smiled placatingly, but without regret. "Those there are private craft."

"I see," said Holter. He thought for a second. "Look—" he said, digging into a pocket and coming out with an envelope. "I have to get moving right away. Here, look at this."

He opened the envelope and took out a sheet of paper which he unfolded and passed to the transportation agent. The man glanced at it.

"But this is just a pass—"

Holter hit him before he finished the sentence and caught the limp body in time to ease it to the ground.

"Come on!" he cried at Dummy, and ran for the nearest of the flyers.

"Which way?" demanded Holter when they were aloft. "Where's Farm One Eighty-nine?"

Dummy fearfully raised his head and pointed north. Holter swung the nose of the flyer in that direction, a tight smile on his face.

It took them about half an hour to reach the farms. Air markers had been set out plainly. Farm 189 was a sprawling patch of rosettes of thick, fleshy leaves spaced in staggered orderly rows. Along one side of the farm ran a deep river of clear water, flowing down to the sea. Near the buildings of the farm was a dock, and beside this Holter set the flyer down.

The farmyard was filled at the moment with great stacks of the broad leaves. Beyond, the greenish black of the artificial soil of the fields began; and from within the scraping house came the steady whirr and thump of machines pulling the pulp and waste material of the leaves from the fibers. No one was in sight. Motioning Dummy to silence, Holter stole up behind one of the leaf piles and peered through the open door into the dim interior of the scraping house. Here and there were shadowy bulking machines; and among them came and went the dim outline of a short, broad, busy figure.

Holter turned to Dummy. "That Bollen?" he whispered.

Dummy nodded, his eyes big.

"Stay here," Holter ordered Dummy. And he strolled openly forward.

Prepared as he was, the abrupt change from brightness to gloom was still so startling that Holter had to stop and blink for a moment. For a second he was blind; and then the first thing the expanding pupils of his eyes revealed was a short, broad face, not a yard from his own, that seemed to hang there, regarding him with light green eyes.

"What d'you want?" said the face.

"I'm off the space ship," said Holter. "I wanted to see how they made rope from plants." He added, "My name's Lauren. Holter Lauren."

Bollen's face did not change. The lips were full without being loose, the nose slightly pug with wide nostrils. A face that might look cheerful, or

sullen, or indifferent as it did now—but hardly anyway else. The face of a healthy human animal. The body was slightly round-shouldered and thick-waisted, broad-chested, short-armed. All this Holter saw in one automatic instant of appraisal.

"Look around if you want," said Bollen, in a voice that was hoarse and rough, as if dust had gotten into the vocal cords. "I got work to do."

He was turning away, when Holter spoke.

"Wait," he said. It seemed to Holter that there was something lacking, as if a high religious sacrifice had turned out to be a simple butcher's job.

"Do you know Jimmy Molloy?" he said.

Bollen's face did not change.

"Sure I know him," he answered.

"I used to know him—we were kids together—" Holter was talking without paying any attention to the sense of his words. "We were orphans together, from Belt Four. Everybody liked Jimmy. He was that kind of guy. I talked to his wife today. She was sitting on the dock there, looking at the sea—"

"Say—" said Bollen suddenly, harshly. "What're you talking about?"

Holter looked at the shorter man calculatingly. Bollen was a full head in height less than himself, but their weights must be close to equal. The sisal farmer was tough; and the bartender had said he could be a dirty fighter.

Well, thought Holter, so could he. He had not bummed around on a dozen different worlds without learning a few things. He saw that Bollen was watching him with the careful balance of a man expecting action. Maybe though, he might be led to think that Holter could be taken by surprise.

"Why—nothing—" he answered, with the little quaver of a man whose nerve might have failed him. "Ah—come to think of it, it's later than I thought, I—I guess I'll be going."

He turned away, started to walk off. And in spite of the fact that he was braced for it, still he almost did not hear the soft, rapid thump of boots running up behind him. There was only that small warning—and then the sudden shock, the short man's arms clamped around his body and the whole weight of the charging body against him. But Holter was ready, crouching, reaching back over his shoulder to seize and flip the short man pinwheeling through the air to the ground ahead.

Bollen landed hard; and instantly Holter was diving on top of him, digging his knee into the other's middle. His knee bounced off surprisingly hard stomach muscles. He rolled hastily clear.

Holter kicked out at the kneeling man's chin; but Bollen grunted and swayed his body sideways. He caught Holter's boot as it shot past, seized and twisted it, throwing him. Holter kicked the hands loose with his other foot and rolled over onto his back, getting his knees up just in time to ward off the short man's diving body. They scrambled apart and to their feet; and faced each other.

There was a wariness in them both now. Each had been surprised by the

quality of the opposition. They had rolled out of the scraping house into the brilliant sunlight and they stood between the wall of the house and a long high pile of leaves. Slowly, step by step, Bollen began to back away along the wall.

Cautiously, looking for an opening, Holter followed. Slowly, like rhythmic ceremonial dancers in a pageant of ancient passions, they moved together back along the loose plank wall until Bollen reached its end. Holter crouched to spring, tensed for an attempt by the other man to break and run; but instead, Bollen's arm flashed out of sight behind the corner of the building, to reappear all in one sweep of motion, swinging the bright flat blade of a machete high through the air.

Only the fact that he was already tensed to leap saved Holter. Instinctively he drove forward, inside the swing of the weapon, catching Bollen's wrist in his left hand and bringing his right hand and arm around the other's body to reinforce his left as he strove to bend Bollen's machete wrist back.

Bollen was inconceivably strong. Even with the power of both Holter's arms against his single one, the farmer's wrist resisted stubbornly before it began slowly to yield. The long blade drooped like a brilliant flower for one long second before Bollen's fingers loosened and it fell.

Triumph boiling inside him, Holter twisted about to drive his right leg between Bollen's to trip him up and throw him down. And then, in the second before Holter could accomplish this, he felt a terrific explosion of pain as the sisal farmer drove his knee upward into Holter's groin. The sky above Holter seemed to blacken with his agony. He felt his grip loosen; he fell, rolling into a ball on the ground.

A shattering kick on his shoulder sent him tumbling. Instinctively, he continued to roll, over and over, in an attempt to get away; but the boots of Bollen found him, in great hammer blows that jarred his undefended body and shook his brain into dizziness. He had one wild melange of impressions—the choking dirt in his nostrils, the flashing picture of Bollen towering above him; and the racking kicks that drove through all his attempts to escape . . . And then, suddenly, they ceased.

Gasping, Holter managed to focus his swimming eyes. He saw Bollen walk away from him over to the fallen machete, pick it up, and turn back toward him. Holter strained to move, but his muscles responded with agonizing slowness.

From the corner of the pile of leaves there was a flicker of sudden motion, and a shrill wordless cry from Dummy. A pitifully ineffective rock bounced off Bollen's shoulder—but it was enough to stop him. He swung angrily, raised the machete threateningly at Dummy's retreating back.

Holter drove his battered body as he had never before in his life. He forced it to his feet and into a lunge for Bollen. Chest slammed against back, and Bollen was banged against the wall, dropping the machete, stunned by the impact. Holter jerked him around and clubbed his fist again and again against Bollen's jaw.

Bollen sagged and they both fell, Bollen still struggling. Kneeling, Holter

twined the fingers of both hands in the dark, thick hair of the sisal farmer; and, raising the shorter man's head, drove it against the wall of the building. He lifted and slammed it down again, and Bollen stopped moving.

Panting, Holter forced himself to stop. Murder was in *him*, now—but he wanted to take Bollen alive. He breathed deeply for several seconds; then he stripped off the sisal farmer's belt and tied Bollen's wrists behind him. A shadow fell across him. Dummy had stolen back and stood hunched above them.

"Bad—bad . . ." said the half-wit, scolding at the unconscious Bollen like some small, nervous animal.

Holter laughed grimly.

Bollen came to on the flyer ride back to Dac City.

Holter flew directly to the city hall and landed on the grass before it. He hauled Bollen from the flyer and thrust him ahead of him, up the steps and in through the doorway of the city hall. Dummy trotted along behind.

They went down the long concrete corridors until they came to the office where Holter had talked to the lieutenant of police that morning. Holter opened the door and pushed Bollen inside.

The lieutenant was at his desk. There also, seated in a chair facing him, was the girl Mincy. Two uniformed policemen stood against a wall.

Holter gave Bollen a shove that sent him half-sprawling across the desk.

"Here's your murderer," he said. "The man that killed Jimmy. I brought him in for you. And don't tell me you can't convict him; because if I have to, I'll bring in the best talent in the galaxy to dig up evidence he did it."

"I know he did it," said the lieutenant. He walked around the desk, helped Bollen upright, and with a knife cut the belt binding his wrists.

"You knew!" said Holter. "You admit it!"

"I never denied it," said the lieutenant, wearily. "Jimmy thought Tige had been short-grading him on the fiber he consigned to Mincy's warehouse. Jimmy went out to talk to him about it. It must have come to a fight between them. . . . Am I right, Tige?"

"That huncher!" growled Bollen, rubbing his wrists.

"Shut up, Tige," said the lieutenant. "Jimmy was worth three of you. As for you—" he turned to Holter—"your landing privileges are canceled here. I'm sending you back to the spaceliner you came on, under guard."

"*But what are you going to do about him?*" Holter almost screamed the words. "He's guilty! You got to make him pay!"

"Got—" the lieutenant put both fists on the desk top and for a moment leaned on it like a very old, very tired man—"give me patience. Make Tige pay for it? Sure. And who takes over Farm One Eighty-nine? You fool, you tourist fool," he said to Holter, "what do you know about it?"

Holter stared at him.

"No," said the lieutenant, savagely, "you don't understand. You can't see that here there's no cash value on being a nice guy, on being kind, or gentle, or a good husband. All that counts here is how much work your

two hands can do. Sure, we all loved Jimmy. He was a good man—but he's dead now. There're men and women and children on the farms and on the docks and in the quarries, and right here in the city, who'll be missing the catch that Jimmy would have brought in today. Who do you think fed them—who do you think feeds me, God help me? I've got a double hernia, and this is the best I can do."

"I—" began Holter.

"Shut up," said the lieutenant softly. "Listen to me. We're on our own here. We're too far out and too isolated to be rescued if anything goes wrong. We're too many to feed if our food supply fails. We can't afford an abstract justice to pamper our moral values or our emotions. Tige killed Jimmy, and nobody likes him for it—but what's to be done? We've lost one worker. Would you take another one from us? God in heaven, there isn't a person in this room, except yourself, that doesn't work fourteen hours a day or better and consider himself lucky to have three meals and a bed to sleep in for it. What can we do to punish Tige that wouldn't punish ourselves at the same time? Rehabilitate him? We haven't got the time. Imprison him? We haven't got the jailer. Sentence him to a lifetime at hard labor? What do you think he's got now?"

Holter sagged. He made a little defeated gesture with one hand.

"I give up," he said, and he turned away. "Let me out of here. I'm going back to the ship."

He took one lagging step forward and made as if to push between the two uniformed policemen. Then, abruptly, he had spung like a cat, shoving one man away from him and clawing at the gun in the other's holster. He had the weapon half-dragged clear before hard arms clamped about him, wrestled him down. He hung pinioned between the two men. The lieutenant walked slowly around the desk to face him.

"You would, would you?" said the lieutenant with a strange quietness. "You'd be your own judge and executioner. You'd risk being deported in irons, knowing that's the worst I could do to you. I suppose you think you've got guts."

He turned about and walked back to the desk. From a drawer he pulled out a sheet of printed paper and scratched briefly on it with a pen. He came back with it to Holter.

"Let him go, boys," he said. "Here." He drew his own sidearm and extended it, butt foremost, together with the paper. "Citizenship application. Sign it—and you can have my gun."

The hands on Holter's arms fell away. A sudden silence filled the office.

"Here, take them," said the lieutenant. "One for one's not a bad trade; and we badly need someone to replace Jimmy. Sign—and you can have his boat and his house. You can probably have Mincy, too. She's going to have to marry again, and she feels about Tige the way you do. She's young and healthy and that's a good sea-farm. You could do worse on this planet."

Holter did not answer. They were all looking at him; Mincy, the lieutenant,

Dummy, and Bollen. Bollen did not avoid his gaze—he stared back at Holter without emotion, without fear.

“Or is that too much to ask?” demanded the lieutenant, softly. “Is that too high a price for you to pay for your revenge—to freeze at the nets and sweat in the sisal fields? Because that’s the price, Lauren. Take over the work that Jimmy did and you can have everything he had, and more—you can have justice as well.”

Holter still did not move, or speak. He stood before them now with all the brittle casing of his dark soul broken and stripped away. High on the wall of the office a clock ticked once, marking a minute gone—a long, long minute dwindling off into eternity, an eternity as grey as the sea, cold as an empty house, agonizing as an injured child, bitter as a legless man. After a while, the lieutenant lowered gun and paper.

“Take him away,” he ordered the two policemen. “Take him back to his spaceliner.”

The hands of the police closed on Holter’s arms. Bollen’s face still showed no emotion. Dummy gazed with wondering animal eyes, and the expression of the lieutenant was now indifferent. It was the eyes of the girl Mincy, as the policemen led him out the door, that made a mark deep on Holter’s naked soul.

The look on *her* face he would never forget. . . .

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Charles L. Fontenay

THE AGENT FOR THE EASTERN
POWERS HAD AN ASTONISHING
DEVICE FOR SECURING SECRETS;
DAN FAIRLANE HAD COURAGE
AND INGENUITY—BOTH OF THEM
HAD TOO MUCH TIME. . . .

blind alley

LEVERARD trapped Dan Fairlane by posing as a salesman of electronics equipment. That way, he not only gained access to Fairlane's Midwestern laboratory, but he was able to bring the translator in with him as a piece of demonstration equipment.

There were guards in front of the building and before the door of Fairlane's private office, of course, but they let the translator go in with him when he showed his fake credentials. The original owner of the credentials was in the river, dead. They searched him for weapons, and, of course, found him unarmed. He had taken care of that differently.

"It's a very compact power-pack," Leverard said, telling part of the truth as he set the translator on Fairlane's big desk. "As you see, it isn't plugged in anywhere. Now, I'll demonstrate its operation."

Fairlane leaned forward to watch the control board as Leverard flicked the switch. Both Fairlane and Leverard, together with the desk and Fairlane's chair, were within the radius of the translator's effectiveness.

The walls of the office, its furnishings and fixtures, disappeared from around them in that instant. They were on the tiny island, its shores lapped by a red sea, which had become familiar to Leverard. He had kidnaped Fairlane from the midst of his armed guards.

Leverard stooped and scooped the pistol from the ground, where he had placed it carefully the last time he was on the island. He levelled it at Fairlane, just in time. Fairlane's astonishment had not hampered his lightning reactions. The scientist's hand already was in his desk drawer.

"Raise your hands, empty, and back away from the desk," warned Leverard. Fairlane complied. Leverard followed him. To be sure that Fair-

lane was not armed, he made Fairlane strip and throw his clothes to one side. He went to the desk, found Fairlane's Luger and hurled it into the red sea, forty feet away.

"Stay back from the desk—at least twenty feet," Leverard ordered. When Fairlane moved back farther, Leverard sat on the edge of the desk, toying with his weapon.

"It is a power-pack, Fairlane," he said, "but it's more. It has a self-contained power unit, but, within its effective radius, it displaces matter out of the normal space-time field. It probably works on a principle similar to your matter-transmitter. It isn't my invention, but I can assure you from experience it works very effectively."

Fairlane looked around him curiously. The island was bare except for a grass-like purple vegetation. The red sea stretched in every direction, and near the horizon a lavender sun hovered.

"Where are we?" asked Fairlane.

"All I can tell you is that we're somewhere completely outside of our normal space-time framework," answered Leverard. "When we reverse the switch and return to space-time, we enter it at the point of least resistance—which is the point one infinitesimal instant after we left it, before the air can rush in to fill the vacuum left by our departure."

"It works in reverse, too. If we leave this island and return to it, we return at the instant we left, even if we should meanwhile live years in our own space-time."

"Theoretically possible," admitted Fairlane thoughtfully. "But your attitude indicates you didn't bring me here just for a demonstration, Mr. . . ."

"Leverard. No, I didn't. I want the specifications for your matter-transmitter."

"You're an agent for the Eastern Powers," accused Fairlane.

Leverard inclined his head.

"It doesn't matter what I am, Fairlane. You may as well do as I say. There's something you should know: I can return to space-time without you, if you are out of the translator's range."

"I can keep you here until you starve. Meanwhile, I can return to space-time, eat, sleep, live a normal life—and my return here will be the instant I left, so you'll have no chance to get any closer to me."

"I can hardly be expected to take your word for that," retorted Fairlane with a wry grin.

"No? I'll give you a demonstration. I'll return to space-time, change clothes and be back in an instant. Note carefully what I'm wearing."

He gave Fairlane a moment to study his attire. Then he reversed the switch. Fairlane was well out of range.

Leverard was back in Fairlane's office, the translator on Fairlane's desk.

But across the desk from him stood Fairlane, naked!

For an instant, Leverard thought that Fairlane somehow had been within the radius of the translator's effective area and returned with him. Then he realized what had happened.

The Fairlane of *now* was still stranded on the island in the red sea. But later, Fairlane would, somehow, be returned to space-time. And, returning, naturally he returned to the same instant he left.

So this was a Fairlane of a later time, after Leverard had gone back to the island, after they had negotiated. The thing that puzzled Leverard was that he fully intended to leave Fairlane stranded on the barren island, after he got the matter-transmitter specifications, and Fairlane shouldn't be back at all.

Leverard still had the pistol. He held it on Fairlane while he thought furiously. Fairlane looked a bit puzzled at first, then his brow cleared. He evidently had figured it out, too.

"You must have given me the specifications for the matter-transmitter," Leverard said slowly, "or you'd still be up there, at pistol-point. Isn't that right?"

"You wouldn't remember, would you?" countered Fairlane. "You couldn't, because it hasn't happened to you yet. Yes, I did even better, Leverard. I made a matter-transmitter for you."

Suddenly Leverard saw it in a flash—why, later, he was to decide to bring Fairlane back instead of leaving him up there to die. Fairlane was his ticket out of the building, through the ring of guards.

But what had made him decide he couldn't just walk out, a departing salesman? And why hadn't he made Fairlane dress?

Well, he couldn't leave Fairlane here now to arouse the guards.

"Got any clothes here?" he asked Fairlane.

"Another suit in the closet."

"Put it on."

Fairlane dressed. With the translator under one arm, his other hand holding the gun on Fairlane in his coat pocket, Leverard forced Fairlane out of the building ahead of him. The guards let them through, and Fairlane made no effort to alert them.

"I'm surprised you didn't call the guards, even at the cost of your life," remarked Leverard.

"Not necessary," replied Fairlane cryptically.

A block away, Leverard made Fairlane turn into a blind alley. Ten feet down the alley, they stopped. There was no one in sight.

Leverard took the pistol out, and pointed it toward Fairlane.

"Come closer, Fairlane," he ordered.

"Wait a minute," demurred Fairlane, backing away. Leverard was between him and the entrance to the alley. "I'm not going back to the island. You don't realize what you're doing."

"You can't get away," said Leverard. "It's a blind alley."

"There's a door—" said Fairlane, still retreating.

"There's death," replied Leverard. "I'll shoot."

Fairlane stopped and turned, spreading his hands in appeal. His face was pale.

"You don't understand," he said. "I've got to find the . . . that thing."

He pointed at the translator.

"It's here," said Leverard, advancing.

Fairlane backed away.

"No!" he exclaimed. "We'll both be dead!"

"Just you," said Leverard, "if you don't stop."

"Well," said Fairlane resignedly, "it's better quick." He turned and sprinted for the door at the end of the blind alley.

Leverard shot him down. He went over and examined Fairlane's body. Fairlane was quite dead.

That took care of Fairlane. There was no problem in disposing of the body. It was within range of the translator.

He flicked the switch.

He was back on the island. The red sea lapped at its shores. The lavender sun hung in the sky. Twenty feet away stood Fairlane, naked. The body was not in evidence, of course—it could not return until the instant this naked Fairlane left the island.

"Something came up," said Leverard. "I didn't get a chance to change my suit."

"Proof enough," said Fairlane quietly. "The desk and chair are gone."

So they were. Leverard had forgotten about them.

"Are you satisfied, then?" asked Leverard.

"I'm satisfied your machine works as you say it does," answered Fairlane.

"All right. Do you want to starve a while, or do I get the secret of the matter-transmitter without trouble?"

"Look, I'm sensible enough to bow to the inevitable," said Fairlane. "If I know it's inevitable, that is. But how do I know that, once you get what you want, you won't just leave me here anyhow? It would solve a lot of problems for you."

That gave Leverard a queer feeling. It was exactly what he had planned, originally. But now he had the answer.

"I need you to get me out of your guarded building," he said, still not sure why. "Look, Fairlane, remember I've already been back and I returned to the instant I left. You're going back, and you'll return to the instant you left. That's the same instant, so we met there."

"I can assure you that you will get back to space-time, and I can assure you from what you've already told me after you get back that you're going to give me the matter-transmitter. Not just the specifications, the transmitter itself."

Fairlane sat down on the grass and thought a while.

"Why don't you have the matter-transmitter then?" he asked at last.

"Because you haven't given it to me yet. Remember, when I was back, that was in my past but it was in your future. You told me then you had given me the matter-transmitter."

"I'll have to believe you," Fairlane said, "because the transmitter is so simple a proposition that it would be easier to make a small one than to

draw the specifications without the proper instruments. All right, Leverard. Let me make you a list of the materials I need. If you'll get them for me, I'll make you a small transmitter."

A small transmitter was all Leverard needed—all that his country's scientists would need to figure out its workings. Maybe Fairlane was thinking of stopping him after he got back to space-time, but that die was cast. Fairlane didn't know it, but he was already dead.

What he still couldn't figure was why, after the transmitter was completed, he wouldn't just leave Fairlane here and have walked out of Fairlane's office alone. It was the simple way. But one couldn't change what had already happened in the future—or could one?

Leverard pulled out a pad and pencil and tossed it to Fairlane. Fairlane made out a fairly long list and tossed it back. Leverard returned to space-time.

Leverard was in the blind alley.

Fairlane's body was gone. That was explainable. Fairlane's body had left here when Leverard had left here before, and the body would appear on the island at that future moment when Fairlane would leave the island. And the fact that it was not here now, the instant after it had left, was proof that it would never be here—that Leverard would leave it forever on the island. Which was exactly what he planned to do.

Pleased by this indication of the success of his plans, Leverard went shopping. He had to visit every electric and electronic shop in town to find the things Fairlane wanted. It took him about two hours. At last the list was complete, and Leverard took all his purchases to his apartment.

With the equipment in half a dozen bundles under his arm, Leverard activated the translator and returned to the island. Fairlane was sitting naked on the grass, twenty feet away.

Leverard took the packages halfway to Fairlane, put them down, and backed away.

"Pick them up and take them back where you are now," he commanded. "I want you to stay out of range of the translator. And, remember, you'll have to demonstrate this gadget to prove to me you're making one that works."

"I planned to do that," said Fairlane, advancing to pick up the materials. "I'll make two small sending and receiving stations, and transfer an object from one to the other of them over a distance of twenty or thirty feet."

It took Fairlane forty hours to do the job. And, since Leverard wanted his victim to make no mistakes, he allowed Fairlane to sleep twice. He even returned to his apartment in space-time and broiled steaks for both of them. It was quicker bringing the steaks back to the island than it would have been carrying them into the living room.

At last Fairlane finished. There were two identical cubicles, about a foot on each edge, one face of each covered with a mass of dials.

"These things don't have power built in them like your machine," said Fairlane. "Where can I get a power source in this God-forsaken place?"

"I told you this translator is a power-pack, and it is," replied Leverard. "You can plug them into it. But do you have enough wire to separate them by thirty feet?"

"The two stations of the matter-transmitter can transmit power, one to the other," said Fairlane. "We'll just have to plug in one of them."

"Good," said Leverard. "I'll keep one station over here, and you can send me something from the other station, where you are."

Fairlane took one of the small matter-transmitters to the halfway point, and went back to the other. Leverard thrust his pistol in his pocket, picked up the station, took it back and plugged it into one of the outlets on the translator's side. The matter-transmitter's power cable was only three inches long.

"What can I send?" asked Fairlane.

"Send me one of your shoes," said Leverard.

Fairlane picked up one of his shoes and put it in the cubicle of the station at his end.

"Stand away from the station," Fairlane warned. "You might get a shock."

Leverard backed away from the cubicle. Fairlane depressed a switch.

Leverard was watching the matter-transmitter station at his end. The translator vanished from beside it.

"The cubicle is a blind," said Fairlane calmly. "The matter-transmitter, like your machine, operates on objects wholly contained within a radius of about two feet. It transmits by switching the stations, one for the other!"

Appalled, Leverard looked toward him. The translator was in Fairlane's hands. In sending the shoe to him, Fairlane had transmitted the translator to himself!

Fairlane disconnected the transmitter and was edging away from Leverard and the transmitter, fumbling for the switch of the translator. Now Leverard realized how it was that Fairlane had returned naked to his office.

Leverard reached into his pocket frantically—and hopelessly—for his pistol.

Fairlane pressed the switch.

The translator was gone from the red island.

The red sea lapped at the shores of the island. The lavender sun was in the sky. A faint breeze riffled the purple grass. A crumpled form lay thirty feet away.

Fairlane had returned to space-time at the instant he left it—in his office, to be shot and killed in the blind alley by Leverard. The translator had returned at the instant *it* left—to Leverard's empty apartment.

If anybody, anywhere, were going to come to the red island with the translator that could take Leverard back to the world he knew . . . ever . . . they would be there that instant.

But he was alone on the island—except for the two small matter-transmitters, a heap of clothing, a few dirty dishes, and Fairlane's dead body. . . .

Sylvia Edwards

the end of Evan Essant...?

EVAN HAD SUFFERED
MOST OF HIS LIFE
FROM A NAGGING
LITTLE WORRY ABOUT
WHETHER HE WAS, OR
WAS NOT THERE, TO-DAY!

"HOW long have you been suffering from this feeling that you are about to pass out of the picture, as you put it?" the psychiatrist asked as he made a notation on the new case-history card headed, "Essant, E."

"It's never seemed so imminent as it does now," the thin, long-legged young man with the horn-rimmed spectacles replied, "but I was haunted by the idea even as a child. I was always near-sighted, and before I was fitted with the proper glasses, everything a short distance away would blur. I thought I blurred like that when people looked at me, I could look at myself in a mirror and verify it. Then one of my teachers—I think it was in the second or third grade—explained the pun in my name to the class one day, and after that the kids would chant doggerel at me,

*'Evan Essant, fade away—
Are you here or not today?'*

"Evanescent," the doctor said as if to himself, "very interesting!"

"My mother has a limited command of English," the patient explained. "She just didn't realize that the name she gave me, when put before our family name, sounds like a word. But as a kid, I thought she'd done it on purpose. And I was a little ashamed of her, because of her foreign accent. To compensate, I set out to master the language. But my father would have been happier if I'd developed my muscles instead of my vocabulary. He was a stocky, powerfully built man, a fireman on the railroad. I've often wished I were more like him, and I guess he did, too."

"You were an only child?" the doctor asked.

"I always thought I was. Until today, I believed I was the only son my mother ever bore. But you won't understand about that until I tell you the rest of it. After my father died, in a wreck, the pension was barely enough to take care of my mother, so I had to quit school and earn my living. The Army wouldn't have me, of course, on account of my eyes, and I didn't have the nerve to ask for a job. What employer would want a nonentity like me? But I would write a story, and put stamps on it, and mail it, and sometimes they didn't come back."

"Do you write under your own name?"

"Why do people always ask a writer that? No, I picked the one field in which I could make no name for myself whatever."

"You mean you signed your stories, 'Anonymous'?"

"Not even that. These were confession stories. Evidently you never read a confession magazine, doctor."

"I can't recall that I did," the doctor admitted.

"Well, look at one, sometime. There are no authors. There is a title, then a first person story. In the place where the by-line belongs, there's nothing."

"Significant," the doctor commented. "Were you under a compulsion to write for this one type of magazine only?"

"Possibly. Looking back, it does seem that I went out of my way to make sure there would be no printed evidence of my existence. But at the time I was thinking of practical reasons. Since I had the confession technique down pat, and was dependent on writing for a living, my agent advised me not to spend too much time experimenting. Not that I was particularly proud of being a confession writer. There are plenty of markets and pretty good rates, but it's not the type of writing a man ordinarily does. These stories deal with the problems of female characters between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two."

"What kind of problems?" the doctor asked.

"Well, here are the titles of some of my stories. *Were We Too Young for Love—Was It Really Love He Wanted—Was It Wrong to Give Him Love?—I Lost the Love of My Baby's Father—I Blamed Her for Stealing My Husband's Love—Love Came Too Soon—Could I Ever Love Him Again. . .* Do you want to hear any more of them?"

"No, that gives me a rough idea."

"Rough is right. The trouble was, I didn't believe in love at first sight. But the minute the female character meets a crew-cut male character with a strong body and a weak mind, she always knows he is the one. As a matter of fact, I didn't believe in love, period. Yet I had to write about it in order to eat."

"Perhaps you just didn't believe anyone could love a nonentity, as you call yourself," the doctor suggested.

"I guess that was it. But I gritted my teeth, and made a living of a sort from confessions for about six years. I went a long time between haircuts, and lived in a furnished room with a single window overlooking an alley.

I didn't care how the place looked, because nobody ever came to see me. I'd pound my portable grimly all day, and in the evening, when I emerged from my cell, I'd wrap myself in a cloak of invisibility. The other tenants passed me in the halls as if I weren't there. Even the landlady didn't speak to me unless the rent was due. Sundays, I went to my mother's for dinner, the rest of the time I cooked in a converted closet called a kitchenette. I didn't have a car, I'd never been on a dance floor, I didn't drink and I was never invited to any parties. I didn't even go to the movies very often—other fellows my age would be there with their dates. So I spent most of my evenings at the branch public library.

"I hadn't lived much, but I lived vicariously in the printed page. I read about everything from Aard-Vark to Xenophobia. But after a certain pretty librarian started to work there, I didn't get so much reading done. I'd sit at a table facing the desk, pretending to read, but watching her quick, feminine motions over the top of the book. Sometimes I pretended to take notes while I composed sonnets about her. I did a lot of day-dreaming about how to break the ice, but I never got to first base with the librarian. A crew-cut male character with a strong body and a weak mind stole her right out from under my nose."

"I gathered as much," the doctor said sympathetically.

"But shortly after this, something very surprising happened. If you'll pardon my talking like a writer, it was completely out of character for me."

"I see," the doctor said, forming a steeple with the finger-tips of his two hands, "and the minute you saw the young lady, you knew she was the one."

"I didn't say that!" Evan protested, sitting up on the couch. Then, as he sank back again, he added, rather sheepishly, "But that's how it happened, for both of us. My agent had just sent me a check for a story, so I put on my one good suit and took a bus to downtown Ellay to have a decent meal for a change. I was sitting at a small table in Clifton's cafeteria, eating lunch.

"There were a bunch of slick chicks at another table nearby, with pony tails, too much eye makeup, skin-tight Capri pants and men's shirts too big for them. They were giggling and cutting up, obviously angling for some strange men to pick them up. They were too young to be doing that, too—one of them still had braces on her teeth.

"Another girl came walking across the room with her tray, and the contrast between her and these others—well, you could tell at a glance that she was a lady. She was wearing a modest full skirt, and a demure little ruffled shirt-waist buttoned high at the throat, and she didn't walk in a suggestive manner, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," the doctor assured him.

"Well, when this girl put her tray on my table, and sat down in the chair opposite me, our eyes met over the Spanish rice, and we knew. I don't know how I had the nerve to speak to her—I guess I was just talking aloud, to myself. I said I'd written that scene a hundred times, and never believed until now that it could actually happen.

"Are you *really* a writer?" she asked, making it sound as if being a writer

was the most wonderful thing in the world. I modestly admitted that I'd had quite a few short stories published, and she asked the usual question, "Do you write under your own name?" I didn't intend to admit, at this point, that I'd never had a by-line. I certainly didn't want her to call me mister, and I wasn't going to say, 'My name is Evan Essant,' and have her laugh in my face. So I got tongue-tied, and she came to my rescue.

"Please don't tell me," she begged. "Let me give you a name that fits you." So she thought a minute and said, "I'm going to call you Mark." That unlimbered my tongue, and I asked why Mark fit me. She said, "Because you'll make your mark in the world."

"Even after Elaine met my mother, and knew my right name is Evan, she kept on calling me Mark, and every time I heard her say it, I remembered the meaning she attached to it. Elaine Kincaid and I saw a lot of each other. There was something about being with her, about the tone of her voice and the way she looked up to me, that made me feel like somebody, for the first time in my life. If a girl like her could believe in me, how could I help beginning to believe in myself? Then, when I got the idea of marrying her—"

"This was *your* idea?" the doctor interrupted.

"Of course it was. Elaine isn't the type to cheapen herself by throwing herself at men. But on the other hand, I couldn't quite bring myself to asking her in so many words—I had so little to offer her. By this time, however, I'd confessed I wrote confessions, and Elaine said she wanted to read some of my stories. So I just gave her a magazine. She got the point right away. She read the story to herself up to the place where the male character proposes. Then she read the proposal out loud, and said, 'Oh, Mark, you have such a poetic way of asking a girl to marry you—how can I resist you?' So it was all settled."

"Clever of you to give her a magazine when she asked for it," the doctor commented drily.

"That's what Elaine thought. She said it was the most original way of proposing she'd ever heard of, and the girls at the office would never get over it. I'm trying to think of the full name of the outfit she works for—she generally just calls it Northwest—"

"Northwest Mounted Police?" the doctor suggested, helpfully.

"No! Northwest Fidelity Mutual, I think. It's an insurance company. She said she wanted to keep her job for at least a year after we were married, so I could quit grinding away at confession stories, and write a book."

"Did her parents approve of this?" the doctor asked.

"Not exactly. Her father's blustering didn't bother me much—I put it down to his chronic bad temper. But her mother really got my goat. She called me—a nobody."

"You shouldn't have taken it literally."

"That's what Elaine said. That I should pay no attention to her mother; she'd soon be talking out of the other side of her mouth, bragging about her son-in-law, the famous author. Elaine was of age, so there wasn't much they could do about it. But under the circumstances, we didn't want her

folks spending a lot of money on an elaborate church wedding. So we had a quiet ceremony before a J.P. on a Saturday afternoon, with the Kincaids and my mother as witnesses. To say my mother was delighted is an understatement. She had almost reconciled herself to the idea that I'd be a bachelor all my days, but not quite.

"We moved into a comfortable furnished apartment Elaine found; the only piece of furniture we had to buy was a desk for my typewriter, to replace the battered table I'd used in my furnished room. The following Monday, when Elaine went to her office, I started outlining my book. It was to be a science-fiction novel called SOL, the autobiography of the sun, told as if it were a conscious entity."

"Sounds like an ambitious project," the doctor said.

"Oh, I was full of ambition. I did a lot of research, and turned out more finished wordage than I ever had before. Elaine is a cracker-jack typist, she copied each chapter in the evenings as I finished it. Besides that, she's a wonderful cook. I was gaining weight, in spite of my heavy writing schedule."

"You didn't plan on having a family right away, I gather," the doctor said.

"No, the apartment building doesn't allow children. We figured on using the advance royalties from the book as the down payment on a little house—then no landlord could dictate to us like that. I was well into chapter seven, in which Sol shrinks to a white dwarf star, throwing off great showers of planetesimal material as it contracts. And just as the sun was giving birth to its family of planets, Elaine informed me that she was pregnant. I don't know which was the more cataclysmic event, from my point of view.

"I was still trying to grasp the full import of this revelation when she sprung the rest of it. She wanted me to be free to continue working on the book full time, and not to rush it, so she intended to keep on working for five or six months—five or six months, mind you—and then ask her father for money.

"She was talking like a stock character in an old-style confession story, the brave little unwed mother carrying the fatherless child. So what did that make me? Nobody. How my mother-in-law would love to have *that* to throw up to me! I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction. I'd show them who wore the pants in this family!

"When I got my one good suit out of the cleaners, I could wear the pants all right, but the vest wouldn't button. Maybe it was Elaine's good cooking, or maybe my chest had expanded two inches since I learned I was a prospective papa. At the employment agency, they were looking for a man who could handle the English language, to dictate letters. They sent me to one of the big oil companies, where I was given some aptitude tests and hired over several other applicants, in spite of my lack of business references. A man named Bowen had been transferred to their Cincinnati office, and they were in a hurry to fill his position before a backlog of mail piled up, so they told me to report for work in the morning. It was a good thing I didn't try

to wear the vest, because on the way home I took a deep breath and a button popped off my shirt.

"I decided to send the book to my agent the way it was—seven completed chapters and an outline of the rest. Publishers seldom sign a contract with an unknown author for an uncompleted book, but I was in such an optimistic mood that I felt SOL was good enough to be one of the rare exceptions. If it brought a contract, I could complete it in the evenings. Elaine had been working two shifts, and if a little thing like her had that much stamina, some extra work certainly wasn't going to hurt me any."

"Well, bless my superego!" the doctor exclaimed, "She *did* make a man of you!"

"There remained the question of what pen-name to use. Elaine's name for me, Mark, was a natural for the first part. We were casting around for a surname when it struck both of us at once—Clifton, in honor of the cafeteria where we met. I rolled a sheet of paper into my typewriter and typed out a title page,

"SOL—a novel by Mark Clifton.

"Reading over my shoulder, Elaine said, 'Mark Clifton. That's good. Somehow it just *sounds* like a science-fiction writer.'

"I thought it was good, too. In fact, I liked it so well that I even used it for the return address on the envelope, and wrote it over my own name on the mailbox downstairs. The next morning, I mailed the manuscript on my way downtown, without any cover letter to my agent, without any explanation to him of how a nameless confession writer whose checks he used to make out 'E. Essant' had suddenly become a science-fiction writer using the pseudonym of 'Mark Clifton.' Then I dismissed the matter from my mind and concentrated on my new job.

"I've been working on the eighteenth floor of a new air-conditioned building, in a big office that houses sixteen correspondents. We handle a large volume of mail from the general public—letters addressed to the Company rather than to any specific department, branch, or individual. I soon learned that most of my fellow correspondents, having been hired for the same reason I was, are frustrated writers. I was accorded considerable respect because I had actually sold some short stories, and particularly because I had a book-length going the rounds.

"Elaine planned on quitting her job very soon—she was just waiting until the girls at the office could 'surprise' her with a baby shower. That was a wonderful time for us. Copying the book had been keeping us home evenings, but now we went for long walks together. Funny, but I'd never really noticed before how little she is. She was always so capable and energetic, I'd thought of her as larger. But as we walked down the street, she hardly came up to my shoulder, and she seemed to lean on my arm more than she used to. It made me throw my shoulders back and breathe deep, stand tall, instead of slumping over to minimize my height as I used to do.

"The most wonderful day of all was the day my agent's telegram arrived. Elaine hadn't felt so well that morning, and had stayed home from work, so

she called me up and read it to me over the phone. I remember every word of it.

"'GOOD WORK, MARK. R&S OFFER CONTRACT. SOL. A THOUSAND ADVANCE, HALF ON SIGNING, HALF ON COMPLETION JUNE FIFTEEN. CAN DO? BARNEY.'

"Lucy Prentice, the branch switchboard operator on our floor, listened in as usual and in fifteen minutes had the news all over the office. My fellow-workers came over to shake my hand, the vice-president in charge of public relations, who heads up five departments including ours, sent me a note in the inter-office mail, and even Miss Smith, the office manager, a sour old maid if there ever was one, extended grudging congratulations.

"One of the biggest and oldest publishing houses in the country, the first publishers to read SOL, had grabbed the first book manuscript I ever submitted in uncompleted form. Neither Elaine nor I saw anything fishy in that. She said she knew all along I had it in me and phoned her mother to indulge in some I-told-you-so talk. I sent Barney a wire consisting of two words, 'YES, MARK.'

"But it didn't seem quite real until the following night, at eleven P.M., when the contract arrived air-mail special delivery. I took it down to the office next morning and signed it with the name that was to appear on the book before a notary in the comptroller's office on the tenth floor. Then I put an air-mail stamp on it and deposited it lovingly in a sack of company mail. That was a Saturday, I picked Elaine up at Northwest at noon and we went out to celebrate.

"First we went to look at a car I'd seen advertised and before I knew it I'd signed another contract, but this time with my right name. I needed a car, of course; if I was going to finish the book by June fifteenth, I couldn't waste so much time commuting by bus. But the salesman talked me into a later model and higher payments than I'd anticipated.

"Then we picked up the first tailor-made suit I'd ever owned in my life, which I'd ordered the week before. Elaine put on the short formal she never gets a chance to wear, and we wound up in a rather plush restaurant where they have an orchestra. I protested that I couldn't dance, but we ordered a bottle of champagne; after all, signing a contract for a first novel is something that happens only once in a lifetime. After two glasses of it, that dance floor didn't look so formidable. Elaine said I was doing fine, and a couple of hours later, I remember vaguely that I was dancing in a haze of champagne with a blonde in a green dress with sequins all over it that clung to her like scales to a fish. After that Elaine took me home; she said I was learning too fast.

"Two days later, the doorbell woke us an hour before the alarm clock was due to ring. I expected it to be another air-mail special with my copy of the contract, signed by the publishers, and Barney's check for four hundred and fifty, the first of what I hoped would be a long series of royalty checks on SOL. Instead it was a night-letter. I signed my pen name and tore it open. It read,

"R&S LEGAL STAFF SAY YOUR SIGNATURE DOES NOT CONFORM TO SIGNATURE ON PREVIOUS CONTRACT. WHAT'S THE MATTER, MARK, HITTING THE BOTTLE? PHONE AT ONCE.

BARNEY."

"Elaine came in just as the Western Union boy left, wrapping her blue housecoat around her. I handed her the wire. 'What previous contract?' she asked puzzled.

"I was beginning to have a horrible suspicion as to who had signed the previous contract, but I refused to believe it until the library opened, and I checked the authors' index. I had a migraine coming on and my eyes blurred so I could hardly read the cards, but I found it: No wonder Elaine thought the name 'Mark Clifton' sounded like a science-fiction writer. He is one. Barney would have caught it, but the actual Clifton is his client, too. My address was different, of course, but writers sometimes move. I had made a ghastly, unforgivable mistake."

"Not a mistake," the doctor said, "I would call it a classic case of a buried urge to self-destruction, implemented by unconscious memory. You had read the real Clifton's work and had consciously forgotten it, but your subconscious retained the name."

"Too pat," Evan objected, "Would it be possible for me to arrange unconsciously to meet a girl in Clifton's cafeteria, and unconsciously convey to her the idea of calling me Mark? At a time, I might add, when I had no use for a pen-name, being a confession writer? And did I unconsciously select the same literary agent who handles Clifton's work, several years before that, just so I could ultimately defeat my own purpose?"

"Quite possible," the doctor said.

"Well, it's no more impossible than some of the other things that have been happening to me, come to think of it," Evan conceded. "At any rate, I ran up a big long-distance bill, conveying my abject apologies to Barney. He said he believed me but he was afraid that when the publishers found out they weren't taking up their option on Clifton's next book, they would withdraw their offer. That's just what they did, though they were very decent about it. They didn't reproach me for trying to cash in on another author's reputation; they simply said that, since this was a first novel, they would prefer to see it in completed form.

"I realized that any other publishers would say the same thing, and when I got the manuscript back, I tried to complete it evenings and week-ends. My job wasn't too demanding, and I'm sure I could have written effectively at night under other circumstances. But every time I looked at SOL, a wave of shame would come over me, driving every creative thought out of my head. I crumpled up every page of new copy I tried to write, and threw the balls of paper in the general direction of the waste basket.

"Finally I decided I had to get the manuscript off my desk, give it a cooling off period. So I put the whole thing in the bottom drawer of the dresser in the bedroom. I'm certain that's where I put it, because I recall

there was nothing in the drawer but a lot of old socks Elaine hadn't had time to mend, and I threw them out to make room for the book manuscript.

"To get it off my mind, I tried to write other things, but for the first time in my life, I experienced a complete dearth of ideas. I had gone from the height of optimism about my future as a writer to the depths of pessimism, and I began to think my deathless prose would never reach a wider audience than one customer in Keokuk, Iowa. Of course, even if I wasn't getting anywhere as a writer, I still had a lot of things to be thankful for—my wife, my job, and a baby on the way. But telling myself that was as ineffective as telling a man with an aching molar that his other teeth are all right. I didn't realize how much more important these other things were to me until I began to lose them, too.

"After the fiasco about the pen-name, Elaine stopped calling me Mark, not wanting to remind me of it. I was Evan Essant, again. One evening, while I was helping her dry the dishes, she said, 'Evan, I hate to tell you this, but I'm afraid the baby was a false alarm.'"

"That's not uncommon," the doctor said.

"In my life it's uncommon," Evan replied, "In fact, it was unprecedented. I couldn't help feeling that the baby was a false alarm because I was a false alarm. I should have seen to it that Elaine took better care of herself, instead of letting her keep on working day and night. Maybe I should have slept on the couch in the living room. Don't you think so, doctor?"

"No, I don't think so, but that's not my specialty. You should follow your obstetrician's orders."

"We hadn't even picked one out. That's another thing I blamed myself for. I should have insisted that she go to a doctor at once."

"Not necessarily. But since there had been no medical confirmation, I am inclined to think that your wife was not actually pregnant, that you have no reason to blame yourself. How did she take it?"

"Better than I did, in some ways. She said she might as well keep on working until the car was paid for, and I made no objections. My tendency to make decisions had somehow evaporated. Likewise my enthusiasm to do a good job at the office. Little errors have been creeping into my dictation. I've been restless and depressed. I haven't been sleeping well lately and I've lost my appetite, I've lost the weight I gained when we were first married.

"Then last night, after Elaine had gone to bed, I was prowling around the apartment, not knowing what to do with myself. I couldn't find anything I wanted to read, and got the idea of digging SOL out of the bottom drawer, reading it over objectively from the beginning, as if someone else had written it. That way, I thought I might get back into the swing of it.

"Elaine still had the light on, she was propped up on the pillows manicuring her fingernails. I opened the bottom drawer, where I'd put my manuscript a couple of weeks ago, and found it empty. The finished chapters, the two carbons, the outline, even my research notes, had vanished.

"I was having a hard enough time forcing myself to write the concluding chapters; to reconstruct the whole book from the beginning would be

virtually impossible. So I worked myself up into a blind rage. I should have known better than to blame Elaine, who had sweated over it with me. Yet what other rational explanation was there? I accused her of throwing SOL out with the trash. When she denied it, I called her a liar.

"I hardly knew what I was saying. I was just dredging up the vilest, bitterest half-truths I could think of to fling at her. It wasn't really the thought of the wasted work that hurt—it was the thought that she'd lost faith in me. And because I was hurt I wanted to make her suffer for it. I wasn't satisfied until I got her crying so she couldn't stop.

"Then I turned my back on her and went to sleep. I don't know what came over me. I woke up briefly about three A.M., I heard her still sobbing softly, and even then I didn't take her in my arms and comfort her. She finally fell asleep through sheer exhaustion, and didn't hear the alarm clock ring.

"By morning, I'd come to my senses. The loss of the book shrank to insignificance beside the stark realization that by lashing out like that, I might have lost the only good thing that every came into my lonely, ineffectual life, the woman who lay there beside me, sleeping. I was filled with remorse, but I didn't dare awaken her to tell her so. I was afraid she wouldn't forgive me.

"I shaved with a razor—the electric shaver she gave me for my birthday makes too much noise. My hands were shaking and I cut myself. I dressed quietly, closed the bedroom door softly behind me, and went to the kitchen to make some breakfast, which I couldn't swallow because I felt like such a heel. I phoned Northwest and told them Elaine wouldn't be in today, that she had a bad cold. On the way downtown, I was thinking that instead of heaping abuses on her head, I should be worshipping at her feet. I was so preoccupied that I got a ticket for driving down the wrong side of the street. I stopped at the florist's shop on the ground floor of the building where I work, selected eleven long-stemmed red roses and a single white one, and told them to deliver them right away.

"By this time I was late for work, and when I got off the elevator on the eighteenth floor, Lucy Prentice seemed disposed to kid me about it. 'May I help you?' she asked, as if I were a stranger to her. So I kidded back, though I really didn't feel up to it. 'I want to see Mr. Essant,' I said. She answered with a straight face, 'We have no Mr. Essant, are you sure you have the right department?'

"Then, when I started to punch in, I found my card missing from its slot. I thought somebody had punched in for me, and misplaced the card, so I went on to my own desk. The nameplate was missing. I looked for it in the top drawer—no nameplate, and nothing else, either. All the drawers were as bare and empty as the dresser drawer at home, where my manuscript had been. Puzzled, I straightened up, to find myself confronting the office manager.

" 'Who took everything out of my desk?' I demanded.

"That's Mr. Bowen's desk," she said acidly, "He was transferred. And who, may I ask, are you?"

"Bowen's replacement," I told her. "As you know!"

"Personnel has not notified me they hired another man to take his place," Miss Smith said. By this time all fifteen people at the other desks had turned to look at us. I'd been working among them daily. Yet I didn't see the light of recognition in a single face. I rushed back to the time clock, but I couldn't find my card in any of the slots.

"Until now, my misfortunes had been natural ones, or had seemed so at the time. But this was unnatural, spooky. It was a bad dream, I told myself, and if I could hear Elaine's voice, I would wake up. For the moment I had forgotten that she probably wasn't speaking to me.

"I took the express elevator to the ground floor, closed myself into a drug store phone booth, and dialed my home number, ringing it long enough to wake the dead. The dead? My God, had she become so despondent she had turned on the gas without lighting the burners? I scraped two fenders backing out of the parking lot, exceeded the speed limit, and took the stairs of the apartment house two at a time.

"The florist's box had already been delivered; it was in the hall, leaning against our door. I burst into the apartment, calling Elaine's name. Except for my own voice and footsteps, the place was silent. It was a relief not to find her lifeless body, and at first I thought she had simply gone to her office. But when I phoned Northwest, she wasn't there. That left me with no alternative but to conclude that she had left me.

"I looked in her closet. As I had expected, her clothes were gone. But as I certainly had not expected, she had taken everything, rather than the contents of an overnight bag. Even the top of her dressing table was bare, not cluttered as it usually is with all the little evidences of femininity, the half-used bottles of perfume, the scattered bobby pins and hairnets tangled up in costume jewelry.

"To go away for a few days to teach me a lesson was one thing; to go away for good was another. My remorse and concern turned to determination. I was going to bring her back, if I had to carry her. She didn't need to act as if she'd never known a man to lose his temper. Her own father certainly doesn't have the patience of Job. Maybe that was the whole trouble. Elaine was used to a man being master in his own house, and I hadn't acted enough that way. From now on, I was going to change, and I had a hunch that would impress her more than any amount of worshipping at her feet.

"When I dialed the Kincaids' number, my mother-in-law answered, and I asked her, 'Is Elaine there?'

"Yes, she is," the old lady said. "But she isn't feeling well. She can't come to the phone."

"You mean she doesn't want to talk to me," I said. "Well, tell her I know she didn't throw the book away, because some other things have been disappearing at the office. I'm sorry I blamed her for it, but she's making too much of an issue of it."

"I don't understand," Elaine's mother said.

"Never mind!" I told her, "Just tell Elaine not to unpack her bags, because I'm coming right over to get her."

"Who is this, anyway?" the old lady demanded.

"Well, who did you think it was?" I asked impatiently.

"One of Elaine's boy friends, I suppose," she replied.

"One of her boy friends!" I exploded. "Listen, Mrs. Kincaid. You may think Elaine has brushed me off for good. I imagine you'd like that. But you have another think coming. She doesn't have one single, solitary thing she can use in court, and you know it."

"In court?" my mother-in-law said. "You must have the wrong number." And she hung up on me.

"At the time, I didn't see the connection between her reaction and the blank stares of my fellow employees. I just thought I was getting the silent treatment from the whole family, and I wasn't going to stand for it. I drove grimly out to the Kincaids' and when my mother-in-law answered the doorbell, I said, 'All right. I came to apologize. But if she wants me to crawl, I'm not going to do it.'"

"What on Earth are you talking about?" the old lady asked me.

"You know damn well what I'm talking about," I said, and added, as I handed over the flowers, "These are for Elaine."

"Mrs. Kincaid opened the box, though she had no business to, and said, 'Oh, how lovely.'"

"Just then, Elaine's old man came into the front hall, in his shirt-sleeves, suspenders, and bedroom slippers. 'Look, Sam,' his wife said to him, 'The girls in Elaine's office sent her some flowers.' He grunted, and she added, 'Well, give the boy a tip.' Kincaid dug into his pants pocket and started to hand me a quarter."

"That did it."

"This has gone far enough," I decided, "I know my rights and I demand to see Elaine! If she won't come downstairs, I'll just have to go up after her. Get out of my way!"

"I took the open box of flowers out of the old lady's hands and pushed past her. I was in no mood to take no for an answer. But as I started up the stairs, a calloused hand attached to a beefy arm grabbed me by the collar. Elaine's father held me at arm's length, glaring at me as if I were a noxious insect he was about to grind to a pulp under his heel. At this point, her mother intervened."

"Please don't lose your temper, Sam," she clucked like an hysterical hen. "He's not a delivery boy, after all, he must be the young man who got the wrong number! He was calling another girl named Elaine, and it was such a good excuse to get acquainted—"

"You got a funny way of getting acquainted," Sam Kincaid said to me, "Just what were you intending to do upstairs? Get in bed with my daughter?"

"Well, I wasn't going to let him bluff me. As a matter of fact," I said coolly, "that is exactly what I intend to do, and you can't stop me."

"It was the wrong answer. Elaine's mother gasped. Her father released my collar, carefully removed my glasses with his left hand, and delivered a short right to the jaw. Fortunately he pulled his punch. He was just giving me the free sample. If he'd put his weight behind it, I would have gone down for the count. As it was, I merely staggered, grabbed the banister, and managed to stay on my feet.

"When my jaw would move again, after a fashion, I mumbled, 'But—don't you know who I am?'

"'No,' Kincaid said. 'And I don't care to find out. I'll give you just thirty seconds to get out of here.' He handed back my glasses and stood there rubbing his knuckles, waiting for the thirty seconds to be up, so he could sock me again.

"I realized, finally, that it wasn't just an act, that he actually didn't recognize me. So I put my glasses on and left. He slammed the door behind me and as an afterthought, opened it again and threw my box of roses after me. They spilled all over the porch. But I vowed I would come back when he wasn't there.

"I am more determined than ever to see Elaine, because I feel she is the key to the whole thing. I was nothing before she came to me, now I am becoming nothing again. If I regain her, I can face the world again, a whole man. If not, I have a strange feeling that my disintegration will become complete.

"I am sure of only one thing, the thing we were sure of the moment we met, that I love Elaine and that she loves me. I will affirm that though I pass through the vanishing point. But the question is, will she remember me as her husband, even though her parents don't? Is love a strong enough force to penetrate this aura of anonymity that seems to envelope me?

"In search of the answer, I went to the house where I was born and brought up, though I was so confused, I hardly knew how I got there. I had run to my mother, just as I did when I was six and blood was flowing from a cut in my bare foot; I was terrified that all the blood would flow from my body and I would dry up and blow away. Now I sought the same binding of my hurts, the same assurance that I would not vanish.

"When my mother unlocked the door, I just stood there, waiting for her to recognize me. Instead, she said, 'I don't want any,' and started to close the door in my face. Desperately I pushed against it, keeping it open, protesting, 'But mama, I'm not selling anything!'

"'Always they're not selling anything,' she said. 'They only got something to give away. But to get it you got to subscribe to a magazine. I got no money for that.'

"I hollered at her, 'Mama! It's me—Evan. Your son!' and she answered, 'You should make an old woman sad. My son Joe, he got kilt in Korea.'

"'You're dreaming, mama!' I told her. 'I never went to war! I was four-F on account of my eyes.'

"'Joe had good eyes,' she said, 'he was a strong, healthy man, just like

his father. And you don't sell me something just because you call me mama. Everybody calls me mama. Go next door—they got plenty money.'

"I was so shocked that I let her get the door shut. She was telling me that I had never existed, that she had borne a different son, who grew up to be the man I always wanted to be. At first I thought she was losing her mind because she has been too much alone, and still grieves over my father's death.

"Yet how could I prove she was wrong? It seemed that nobody else knew me, either, that whatever slight mark this nonentity has made in the world has been erased. I can't even produce a single printed story with my byline. Then, with a sense of relief, I recalled that I had excellent identification in my billfold, a negative photostat with the words, 'Must wear corrective lenses' in the corner, with my name, birth date, the color of my eyes and hair, my height and weight, with the letter 'M' in the square marked 'Sex' and the word 'yes' in the square marked 'Married.' My driver's license would prove everything about me! I swear I had it this morning when I got a ticket. But this afternoon, when I searched for it frantically, it had disappeared, just as my manuscript did—just as my job did.

"That's when I decided to come here. My mother isn't losing her mind—I am. I recognized your name in the classified, doctor, because Elaine's mother mentioned once that she knows you by reputation. I almost hope you tell me that I am mentally deranged. That's bad enough, but at least it's conceivable. It's better than being non-existent."

The young man sat up, swung his long legs over the side of the couch and planted his feet on the floor, waiting, with a strained expression, for the doctor's verdict.

"I shall have to ask you a few questions," the doctor said. "Please answer, even if they sound rather foolish. Who are you, where are you, what year is it, and who's President?"

"I'm Evan Essant, I'm in a psychiatrist's office in Los Angeles, it's nineteen sixty-one, and the President is Kennedy."

"As I thought, you're oriented in all three spheres," the doctor said. "Walk across the room, please."

The patient took a moment to react to this unexpected command, then complied.

"Now walk toward me," the doctor said, and as the patient was about to collide with the desk, he added, "That's fine. Now sit down and remove your glasses."

The doctor shone a small flashlight into the patient's eyes, then announced, "You don't show the physical symptoms of an active psychosis."

"I thought all a person had to do to get into the booby hatch was to give a doctor a recital like I just gave you," Evan remarked. "It's not that simple, is it?"

"No, it's not that simple," the doctor agreed. "You might be surprised to know how many people try to get into mental hospitals just to avoid

facing their problems. Now, you say you used some rather violent language to your wife. Did you ever become physically violent, or attempt suicide?"

"Certainly not!" Evan said. "On the contrary, the very fact that I'm here seems to indicate that I'm trying to preserve myself, if possible."

"Exactly," the doctor said. "It also tends to indicate that you are not psychotic. If you were, you would be convinced that your interpretation of this series of rejections is a valid one, and you would not seek psychiatric help."

"I do need help," Evan said, "but what can you do in a situation like this?"

"I want you to take some medication and come back to see me again Tuesday," the doctor said, as he wrote a prescription. "But I am inclined to think your mother is the one who may need hospitalization."

"Will pills make people recognize me?" Evan asked, dubiously.

"They will relieve the tension, so you can evaluate this lack of recognition more clearly," the doctor replied. "Naturally, your mother's rejection of you, coming after these other traumatic events, affected you profoundly, and you projected it back onto other people. But once you can relax, you will realize that these other losses have a more reasonable explanation. Then you can begin doing something about them. Report your driver's license lost and get a duplicate. Register at an employment agency. And by all means, effect a reconciliation with your wife, regardless of her parents' objections. You may take that as the doctor's orders."

"I'll follow your orders on that if it's humanly possible," Evan said, "Even if I have to go back to their house after Kincaid is asleep with a ladder long enough to reach her window sill. But since you seem to have all the answers, doctor, maybe you can advise me what to do about some immediate practical problems."

"What problems, for instance?" the doctor asked.

"Money, for instance. I doubt I even have enough to get that prescription filled. On the way over here I stopped at one of the company stations for gas, and tried to cash a personal check. You can imagine my embarrassment when it faded out as if I'd written it in disappearing ink. Among other things, I've had nothing to eat today, and that makes me feel even more as if I were passing out of the picture. But I don't know whether to settle for a hamburger, or blow the bankroll on a steak dinner. Should I hurry up and spend what money I have in my pockets before it disappears, too, or should I make it last as long as possible?"

"Perhaps you could sell your car to tide you over until you get a job," the doctor suggested.

"I had a car when I came here," Evan agreed. "I've been trying to figure out why, and I think it's because the finance company has more money in it than I do. So far, only my personal possessions that are paid for in full have been disappearing. This suit, shirt, and shoes, were bought on a charge account, so I haven't been arrested for indecency yet. But I paid cash for my underwear, and it's gone. Likewise my socks."

He expended one of his long legs, pulled up the cuff of his trousers, and exposed a bare, bony ankle.

"That is a problem," the doctor admitted, as he stared at it.

"It may solve itself," Evan said. "My fellow-employees, my in-laws and my mother, could see me, though they didn't recognize me. But on the way over here, something new seems to have been added. I parked across the street, and walked over in a marked cross-walk. A big truck and several cars kept right on going through the pedestrian cross-walk, as if none of the drivers could see me. If I weren't fast on my feet, I'd be on a slab at the morgue, where my visibility or invisibility would be of academic interest only.

"Two people bumped into me on the sidewalk. The elevator operator closed the door in my face, though there was plenty of room for another passenger. The girl in your outer office paid no attention to me until I'd been standing in front of her desk for several seconds. My image seems to register if people look at me long enough, but not at a glance."

The doctor took off his pince-nez, polished them, perched them anew on the bridge of his nose, and stared through them intently.

"Do you have trouble seeing me now?" Evan demanded, in alarm.

"Power of suggestion," the doctor said. "Now, suppose we get started? Just lie back and say whatever comes into your mind. But please speak louder. I can't hear you."

Realizing that all memory of the case had been abruptly erased from the doctor's memory, Evan was too stunned to reply. It would have done little good, in any event, for his voice, sounding normal to his own ears, was apparently muffled before it reached the listener as if there were an impalpable glass wall of increasing thickness between. Evan raised his hand before his eyes, and in unbelieving fascination, stared through it.

The doctor picked up a medical journal from his desk, glanced through its pages, then put it down, tilted his desk chair back and contemplated the ceiling. He wrinkled his high forehead, looking perplexed, as if trying to bring into focus some vague thought that lingered in the back of his mind. Finally, with a shrug, he dismissed the matter and pushed a button on his desk.

The door opened promptly and the receptionist entered. "Do you have a cylinder for me to type while you see your next patient?" she asked.

"What makes you think I was dictating?"

"I thought I heard your voice."

"You were mistaken. I seldom have a free hour, and I was catching up on the journals. Who's in the waiting room?"

"A Mrs. Kincaid brought her daughter, Elaine, age 23, but I'm not sure of the patient's last name. The mother insists it's Kincaid, but Elaine says she's been married. I guess that must be the girl's aberration, that she's married to somebody her mother doesn't even know. You certainly run into some strange things here!"

"Very interesting," the doctor said. "Send the mother in first and I'll get the facts from her while the young lady waits outside for a few moments."

A sudden, aggressive breeze stirred the papers on the desk, ruffling an unused case history card and prescription blank. Then it blew through the open door to the waiting room, ruffling the receptionist's hairdo in passing.

She raised her hand to rearrange her bangs. "It's drafty in here," she complained as she left to carry out the doctor's orders.

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SOMETHING

SMALL and provincial, the college topped the gentle rise in the center of the plain; small and provincial, the museum stood just east of it amid the level fields. Through the open windows the afternoon sun, streaming across a thousand miles of Middle West, came to rest in a warm pool of light at the foot of the Egyptian Room door. Outside, the trees, planted around the building in a self-conscious row by some long-forgotten founder, stirred gently in the fresh yet drowsy air of early spring. The season, not yet productive of flies, permitted the heavily ornamented front doors to stand open on a view which passed across the main college buildings to the town, beyond it to fields already sown with grain, and so presently to an endless immensity of far distances lost at last in the cloudless depths of the sky.

Standing outside on the steps for a second before going back in, he felt completely at peace. Everything—his position as curator, the chance to study, the opportunity to live with just the right degree of responsibility in the academic atmosphere he loved—conspired to give him a steady satisfaction, sharpened by the afternoon's perfection into something approaching happiness. Even the neglect which was his only reward for the careful care he gave the museum's small but comprehensive collection had ceased to bother him. They cared little for him, the students whose cars he could see in the distance passing toward the town, and even the faculty rarely entered his domain; but today that seemed unimportant, far away, in another world from this warm and sleepy hour.

As he stood there, his mind lazily relaxed, a little breeze rose suddenly in the fields, sliding like a snake through the shoots of grain. It leaped and twisted toward him, turning and writhing as though moved by a life of its own. A pleasurable anticipation banished the thought that the sparse hairs, so carefully combed, would be disarranged. What if they were! It was spring, and wind was good in the spring, and what if hairs were disarranged! He hoped they would be.

He noticed that the breeze had grown stronger, darting from side to side through the grass. It was about a hundred yards away, now. From somewhere in the fields it had picked up a weatherbeaten scrap of paper, was tossing it furiously back and forth like a puppy with a bone. Just before the wind reached him, the paper fell to the ground; then the current of air, rushing swiftly up the steps, struck him full in the face. He gasped, not only at its force, which he had underestimated, but at its nature, which he had not foreseen. It was hot—unusually hot and dry; so arid and lifeless that it quite took his breath away for a second. It wasn't a spring wind at all; rather the wind of summer, and summer somewhere far away in a hot land. It caused his throat to constrict painfully; then it was gone.

He looked around stupidly, as though he expected to see something behind him; but there was nothing. Only the open doors, the main room of the museum with its neat row of cases, the grand stairway going up to the right, and the sun falling across the floor to the Egyptian Room. He shook his head, as if dazed, and laughed. What a silly thought! For a moment, when the breeze had dropped the paper so abruptly, he had had the curious impression that its sudden loss of interest had been caused by a more than normal whimsy. He had had the odd idea that it had dropped the paper *because it was bored*. And when it had finally reached the steps, it had seemed to pass, not around, but through him. He laughed again, ruefully; he was getting old! Old and doddering and—and crazy in the head, as they said.

He turned back to the peaceful panorama which stretched to the horizon. Spring! Spring, and he was not so old, either! As if to prove it, he ran lightly down the steps to where the paper lay on the grass. He couldn't leave rubbish lying around for the cats to play with. There were two or three, living in forgotten corners of the masonry, existing on mice and insects and scraps of food he sometimes remembered to bring them; one was a little gray kitten, of which he was quite fond. Realizing what a holiday they would have with it if they found it, he picked the paper up, folded it neatly, and trotted back up the steps.

At the top he turned for a last look at the gentle peace of the afternoon. Then he started in. In the doorway he paused. For some reason he could not explain, he wanted to close the doors after him. He attempted to ignore the feeling; he could not, the compulsion was too strong. After a moment, not knowing quite why, he pulled the doors part-way together; a shame-faced gesture, and one coming, though he did not know it, too late.

He noticed the confusion on his desk as soon as he started toward it. The papers he had left neatly piled on each side of the blotter had been

pushed askew; one was half-way across the floor to the Egyptian Room. If the breeze had done that, it must have taken almost a right-angle turn once it got inside the door, for the desk stood along the wall to the right, opposite the foot of the stairs. Or had it been one of the cats, slipping in when his back was turned? He remembered running down the steps, leaving the door unguarded. After a moment he decided that must be it; and a tolerant amusement caused him to smile. Charming animals, but pesky, sometimes; and apt to be mischievous. It was not until he reached the desk that his complacency vanished.

Was it only a quirk of the mind, or did he actually see a pattern in the confusion there? He could almost swear to it; a sort of deliberate disarray, as though someone had picked the papers up, held them high above the desk, and then let them fall. And on the desk itself, the papers still remaining had a curiously abandoned look, as though someone had been engaged in disturbing them and then had stopped suddenly. And again that odd impression of boredom shot through his mind, bringing with it this time a faint uneasiness, such as one might feel in the presence of something just a little abnormal, and strange.

Still, he thought, as he picked up the papers and rearranged them in their former order, it could have been the cats; in fact, it must have been the cats. The little gray kitten in particular was fond of climbing on the desk; never, to be sure, to wreak quite such havoc as it had this time, but always to disturb whatever it came across. He realized that it must be somewhere in the building now, and, thinking of the serious damage it could do to the fragile exhibits on the second floor, he started hastily up the marble staircase. On the landing he paused abruptly. Before he could stop himself, he had whirled around like a toy on a revolving platform and called out into the empty room below.

"What's that?" he said. The words flung themselves back to him sibilantly from the echoing walls. Nothing stirred in the sunlight on the floor, no sounds other than those of the day outside came to him. After a moment he laughed shortly. How stupid! He knew he was alone in the building; he must have imagined that sudden sensation of another presence. He told himself firmly not to be a fool. If he started seeing things in broad daylight, what would it be like when—he gasped, and a little chill of fear ran suddenly down his back.

"Well, for heaven's sakes," he said to the listening statues, the attentive cases, "look at that desk!"

He was not quite sure how he got back down the stairs and across the floor to it, for when he did his relief blotted out the details of one of the hardest things he had ever done. "I feel like dancing a jig," he thought; and the idea amused him so much that he began to laugh. What would people say if they came in and caught him capering! And for such an insignificant reason, too. Simply because a kitten had got its paw wet with ink and drawn a long smear on his blotter—simply because a kitten *was* a kitten, beyond all doubt—he wanted to dance a jig! He continued to chuckle at

himself while he picked up the papers for the second time and put them away in the desk. If he wasn't the one, letting a breeze and a kitten give him the fidgets! What wouldn't it be next!

He had just finished putting the last paper away in the drawer when the noise began. At first it was very faint and very far away, and he hardly noticed it. Then it grew stronger and he began to hear it. Intrigued by its quality, he tried idly to find an explanation. It wasn't a steady sound, but quick, nervous, separated. It might be someone having trouble with his car; but not quite. It might be water spattering onto pavement from a hose; but not quite. For a long time it seemed to originate in the fields. Nor until he decided that it sounded exactly like heavy cloth being torn did he realize that it was coming from somewhere inside the building.

His first impulse was one of disbelief, followed by annoyance. It wasn't enough to see things; one had to hear them too. He told himself again not to be a fool. There was probably some very simple explanation. But when none occurred to him, he began to grow afraid. It was such a pointless noise; there was so little excuse for it. It seemed to exist outside time and space, as remote from humdrum reason as the paper in the breeze or the disarrangement on his desk. In fact, if one were romantic enough, one might almost see a connection between them, a certain perverse pattern linking them together. Not that he did, of course; but it was all he could do to make himself leave the desk and begin searching the building. Only a sense of duty and the realization that he would be foolish to give in to his feeling made him do so.

When he had gone through all the rooms, upstairs and down, and found each as he knew it would be, placid and empty and still, he returned breathlessly to the head of the stairs. The noise was beginning to grow a little louder, its harsh rasp more frequent. He shook his head helplessly. It couldn't be explained; and it couldn't be found; and he didn't really know what to do about it. He might ignore it; but it was scarcely the sort of thing one could ignore. It was too strange, too—frightening.

His hands felt cold; the combination of the beautiful day and that pointless sound produced by its very incongruity a mood closely approaching terror. He knew that running back to the head of the stairs so fast that he had almost missed the landing and fallen hadn't helped matters any; but he had not been able to prevent that instinctive flight, even when his mind told him it was a flight from nothing. The sunlight had seemed suddenly garish, the peace of the afternoon a mockery; he had had again that sharp impression of—something. It had given wings to his feet; before he knew it, he had hastened back to the echoing expanse of the main room.

Resting for a moment while he caught his breath, he began to notice a new rhythm in the noise. It was slower; no quieter, but much slower. Presently it stopped for several seconds and then began again. A thrill of recognition caused him to catch his breath. It's getting bored again, he thought; *what will it do now?* He cleared his throat abruptly and counted firmly to ten. When he had finished he forced himself to laugh.

"How absurd!" he said aloud. "I'm talking just as though there really were something."

The familiar sound of his own voice restored his composure and his common sense. What a doddering old ninny he was! Making a ghost out of whole cloth and then letting it scare him to death! He must have one foot in the grave, indeed; the one he thought with, evidently.

He marched firmly down the stairs and across to his desk, putting the noise aside brusquely. Let it tear up the whole roll of burlap if he wanted to, whatever it was. He had other things to do. He couldn't be bothered with noises, no matter how unique.

Noticing the ink-smeared blotter when he reached the desk, he remembered that the kitten was still somewhere in the building.

"Kitty!" he called. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!" Then he gave an amused sigh of relief. "Why, of course," he said. "It's sharpening its claws somewhere."

After that it was easy to search the building again. It was one thing to look for a Noise, a disembodied Something; it was another to look for a kitten. Outside the door of the Egyptian Room he hesitated momentarily in the sun. In his mind's eye he could almost see the little animal, busily engaged in—or could he? Supposing—supposing that when he opened the door he saw— A sudden furious scratching decided him. The little devil must be sharpening its claws on one of the mummy-cases that stood along the walls. He strode forward impatiently, into the absolute silence of the empty room.

"Kitty?" he said tentatively. His only answer was a sudden bickering of the birds in the trees outside. He called again.

"Here, kitty?" The silence seemed to become, if anything, more profound.

"Come out here, you little scamp!" he said; in spite of himself he was unable to keep a pleading note out of his voice. "Come out from under there!

"Kitty!" he said firmly; and regretted it at once, for the noise answered him. As surely as though it had spoken, it answered; a surprised, somewhat uncertain, somewhat puzzled answer.

"What?" its rasp seemed to be saying.

"Kitty!" he cried, his voice growing thin.

"What? What?" said the noise again.

At this sound, which seemed to represent the impersonal curiosity of something so inhuman, or so long dead, that it had lost all contact with the world of men, his control snapped completely.

"What are you?" he cried. "What do you want, you frightful thing?"

At once the room filled with sound, harsh, rasping, furious, echoing back and forth between the walls until it seemed to come from everywhere. He felt as though a weight were pressing on his head; a storm of sound seemed to be crushing the breath from his body.

With an inarticulate cry he turned and ran from the room. Pursued by phantoms which seemed to dance along the sunlight, caught in the grip of

fear, he ran frantically across the floor and without reason up the stairs. No, his mind said senselessly; no. *Go back*. Unable to control his terror, he turned like a desperate animal. In his haste, blinded by the sunlight which now fell full across the landing, his foot missed the step and he hurtled forward, to land halfway down the stairs. Just before his skull struck the stone a streak of gray shot across his vision. In a last flash of sanity he had time to think *Of course, of course*, before his mind reeled down forever into darkness.

The kitten trotted out into the center of the room, stretched and yawned. It paid no attention to the ponderous descent of his body as it slid slowly, jerkily, step by step to the floor.

Purring contentedly, the kitten cleaned itself. Finished, it stretched once more and yawned again. Suddenly it stopped and listened intently. Its eyes widened, and along its back the hairs began to rise.

From somewhere in the echoing room a little noise began. It wasn't a steady sound, but quick, nervous, separated. It sounded exactly like heavy cloth being torn, and it grew rapidly louder and nearer as the kitten crouched rigid with terror in the sun.

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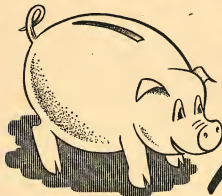
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THE MAN WHO LOST THE SEA

SAY you're a kid, and one dark night you're running along the cold sand with this helicopter in your hand, saying very fast *witchy-witchy-witchy*. You pass the sick man and he wants you to shove off with that thing. Maybe he thinks you're too old to play with toys. So you squat next to him in the sand and tell him it isn't a toy, it's a model. You tell him look here, here's something most people don't know about helicopters. You take a blade of the rotor in your fingers and show him how it can move in the hub, up and down a little, back and forth a little, and twist a little, to change pitch. You start to tell him how this flexibility does away with the gyroscopic effect, but he won't listen. He doesn't want to think about flying, about helicopters, or about you, and he most especially does not want explanations about anything by anybody. Not now. Now, he wants to think about the sea. So you go away.

The sick man is buried in the cold sand with only his head and his left arm showing. He is dressed in a pressure suit and looks like a man from Mars. Built into his left sleeve is a combination time-piece and pressure gauge, the gauge with a luminous blue indicator which makes no sense, the clock-hands luminous red. He can hear the pounding of surf and the soft swift pulse of his pumps. One time long ago when he was swimming he went too deep and stayed down too long and came up too fast, and when he came to it was like this: they said, "Don't move, boy. You've got the bends. Don't even *try* to move." He had tried anyway. It hurt. So now, this time, he lies in the sand without moving, without trying.

His head isn't working right. But he knows clearly that it isn't working right, which is a strange thing that happens to people in shock sometimes. Say you were that kid, you could say how it was, because once you woke up lying in the gym office in high school and asked what had happened. They explained how you tried something on the parallel bars and fell on your head. You understood exactly, though you couldn't remember falling. Then a minute later you asked again what had happened and they told you. You understood it. And a minute later . . . forty-one times they told you, and you understood. It was just that no matter how many times they pushed it into your head, it wouldn't stick there; but all the while you *knew* that your head would start working again in time. And in time it did. . . . Of course, if you were that kid, always explaining things to people and to yourself, you wouldn't want to bother the sick man with it now.

Look what you've done already, making him send you away with that angry shrug of the mind (which, with the eyes, are the only things which will move just now). The motionless effort costs him a wave of nausea. He has felt seasick before but he has never *been* seasick, and the formula for that is to keep your eyes on the horizon and stay busy. Now! Then he'd better get busy—now; for there's one place especially not to be seasick in, and that's locked up in a pressure suit. Now!

So he busies himself as best he can, with the seascape, landscape, sky. He lies on high ground, his head propped on a vertical wall of black rock. There is another such outcrop before him, whip-topped with white sand and with smooth flat sand. Beyond and down is valley, salt-flat, estuary; he cannot yet be sure. He is sure of the line of footprints, which begin behind him, pass to his left, disappear in the outcrop shadows, and reappear beyond to vanish at last into the shadows of the valley.

Stretched across the sky is old mourning-cloth, with starlight burning holes in it, and between the holes the black is absolute—wintertime, mountain-top sky-black.

(Far off on the horizon within himself, he sees the swell and crest of approaching nausea; he counters with an undertow of weakness, which meets and rounds and settles the wave before it can break. Get busier. *Now.*)

Burst in on him, then, with the X-15 model. That'll get him. Hey, how about this for a gimmick? Get too high for the thin air to give you any control, you have these little jets in the wingtips, see? and on the sides of the empennage: bank, roll, yaw, whatever, with squirts of compressed air.

But the sick man curls his sick lip: oh, git, kid, git, will you?—that has nothing to do with the sea. So you git.

Out and out the sick man forces his view, etching all he sees with a meticulous intensity, as if it might be his charge, one day, to duplicate all this. To his left is only starlit sea, windless. In front of him across the valley, rounded hills with dim white epaulettes of light. To his right, the jutting corner of the black wall against which his helmet rests. (He thinks the distant moundings of nausea becalmed, but he will not look yet.) So he scans the sky, black and bright, calling Sirius, calling Pleiades, Polaris, Ursa Minor.

calling that . . . that . . . Why, it *moves*. Watch it: yes, it moves! It is a fleck of light, seeming to be wrinkled, fissured, rather like a chip of boiled cauliflower in the sky. (Of course, he knows better than to trust his own eyes just now.) But that movement . . .

As a child he had stood on cold sand in a frosty Cape Cod evening, watching Sputnik's steady spark rise out of the haze (madly, dawning a little north of west); and after that he had sleeplessly wound special coils for his receiver, risked his life restringing high antennas, all for the brief capture of an unreadable *tweetle-eeep-tweetle* in his earphones from Vanguard, Explorer, Lunik, Discoverer, Mercury. He knew them all (well, some people collect match-covers, stamps) and he knew especially that unmistakable steady sliding in the sky.

This moving fleck was a satellite, and in a moment, motionless, uninstrumented but for his chronometer and his part-brain, he will know which one. (He is grateful beyond expression—without that sliding chip of light, there were only those footprints, those wandering footprints, to tell a man he was not alone in the world.)

Say you were a kid, eager and challengeable and more than a little bright, you might in a day or so work out a way to measure the period of a satellite with nothing but a timepiece and a brain; you might eventually see that the shadow in the rocks ahead had been there from the first only because of the light from the rising satellite. Now if you check the time exactly at the moment when the shadow on the sand is equal to the height of the outcrop, and time it again when the light is at the zenith and the shadow gone, you will multiply this number of minutes by 8—think why, now: horizon to zenith is one-fourth of the orbit, give or take a little, and halfway up the sky is half that quarter—and you will then know this satellite's period. You know all the periods—ninety minutes, two, two-and-a-half hours; with that and the appearance of this bird, you'll find out which one it is.

But if you were that kid, eager or resourceful or whatever, you wouldn't jabber about it to the sick man, for not only does he not want to be bothered with you, he's thought of all that long since and is even now watching the shadows for that triangular split second of measurement. *Now!* His eyes drop to the face of his chronometer: 0400, near as makes no never mind.

He has minutes to wait now—ten? . . . thirty? . . . twenty-three?—while this baby moon eats up its slice of shadowpie; and that's too bad, the waiting, for though the inner sea is calm there are currents below, shadows that shift and swim. Be busy. Be busy. He must not swim near that great invisible amoeba, whatever happens: its first cold pseudopod is even now reaching for the vitals.

Being a knowledgeable young fellow, not quite a kid anymore, wanting to help the sick man too, you want to tell him everything you know about that cold-in-the-gut, that reaching invisible surrounding implacable amoeba. You know all about it—listen, you want to yell at him, don't let that touch of cold bother you. Just know what it is, that's all. Know what it is that is touching your gut. You want to tell him, listen:

Listen, this is how you met the monster and dissected it. Listen, you were skin-diving in the Grenadines, a hundred tropical shoal-water islands; you had a new blue snorkel mask, the kind with face-plate and breathing-tube all in one, and new blue flippers on your feet, and a new blue spear-gun—all this new because you'd only begun, you see; you were a beginner, aghast with pleasure at your easy intrusion into this underwater otherworld. You'd been out in a boat, you were coming back, you'd just reached the mouth of the little bay, you'd taken the notion to swim the rest of the way. You'd said as much to the boys and slipped into the warm silky water. You brought your gun.

Not far to go at all, but then beginners find wet distances deceiving. For the first five minutes or so it was only delightful, the sun hot on your back and the water so warm it seemed not to have any temperature at all and you were flying. With your face under the water, your mask was not so much attached as part of your, your wide blue flippers trod away yards, your gun rode all but weightless in your hand, the taut rubber sling making an occasional hum as your passage plucked it in the sunlit green. In your ears crooned the breathy monotone of the snorkel tube, and through the invisible disk of plate glass you saw wonders. The bay was shallow—ten, twelve feet or so—and sandy, with great growths of brain-, bone-, and fire-coral, intricate waving sea-fans, and fish—such fish! Scarlet and green and aching azure, gold and rose and slate-color studded with sparks of enamel-blue, pink and peach and silver. And that *thing* got into you, that . . . monster.

There were enemies in this otherworld: the sand-colored spotted sea-snake with his big ugly head and turned-down mouth, who would not retreat but lay watching the intruder pass; and the mottled moray with jaws like bolt-cutters; and somewhere around, certainly, the barracuda with his undershot face and teeth turned inward so that he must take away whatever he might strike. There were urchins—the plump white sea-egg with its thick fur of sharp quills and the black ones with the long slender spines that would break off in unwary flesh and fester there for weeks; and filefish and stonefish with their poisoned barbs and lethal meat; and the stingaree who could drive his spike through a legbone. Yet these were not *monsters*, and could not matter to you, the invader churning along above them all. For you were above them in so many ways—armed, rational, comforted by the close shore (ahead the beach, the rocks on each side) and by the presence of the boat not too far behind. Yet you were . . . attacked.

At first it was uneasiness, not pressing, but pervasive, a contact quite as intimate as that of the sea, you were sheathed in it. And also there was the touch—the cold inward contact. Aware of it at last, you laughed: for Pete's sake, what's there to be scared of?

The monster, the amoeba.

You raised your head and looked back in air. The boat had edged in to the cliff at the right; someone was giving a last poke around for lobster. You waved at the boat; it was your gun you waved, and emerging from the

water it gained its latent ounces so that you sank a bit, and as if you had no snorkel on, you tipped your head back to get a breath. But tipping your head back plunged the end of the tube under water; the valve closed; you drew in a hard lungful of nothing at all. You dropped your face under; up came the tube; you got your air, and along with it a bullet of seawater which struck your somewhere inside the throat. You coughed it out and floundered, sobbing as you sucked in air, inflating your chest until it hurt, and the air you got seemed no good, no good at all, a worthless de-vitalized inert gas.

You clenched your teeth and headed for the beach, kicking strongly and knowing it was the right thing to do; and then below and to the right you saw a great bulk mounding up out of the sand floor of the sea. You knew it was only the reef, rocks and coral and weed, but the sight of it made you scream; you didn't care what you knew. You turned hard left to avoid it, fought by as if it would reach for you, and you couldn't get air, couldn't get air, for all the unobstructed hooting of your snorkel tube. You couldn't bear the mask, suddenly, not for another second, so you shoved it upward clear of your mouth and rolled over, floating on your back and opening your mouth to the sky and breathing with a quacking noise.

It was then and there that the monster well and truly engulfed you, mantling you round and about within itself—formless, borderless, the illimitable amoeba. The beach, mere yards away, and the rocky arms of the bay, and the not-too-distant boat—these you could identify but no longer distinguish, for they were all one and the same thing . . . the thing called unreachable.

You fought that way for a time, on your back, dangling the gun under and behind you and straining to get enough warm sunstained air into your chest. And in time some particles of sanity began to swirl in the roil of your mind, and to dissolve and tint it. The air pumping in and out of your square-grinned frightened mouth began to be meaningful at last, and the monster relaxed away from you.

You took stock, saw surf, beach, a leaning tree. You felt the new power of your body as the rollers humped to become breakers. Only a dozen firm kicks brought you to where you could roll over and double up; your shin struck coral with a lovely agony and you stood in foam and waded ashore. You gained the wet sand, hard sand, and ultimately with two more paces powered by bravado, you crossed high-water mark and lay in the dry sand, unable to move.

You lay in the sand, and before you were able to move or to think, you were able to feel a triumph—a triumph because you were alive and knew that much without thinking at all.

When you *were* able to think, your first thought was of the gun, and the first move you were able to make was to let go at last of the thing. You had nearly died because you had not let it go before; without it you would not have been burdened and you would not have panicked. You had (you began to understand) kept it because someone else would have had to

retrieve it—easily enough—and you could not have stood the laughter. You had almost died because They might laugh at you.

This was the beginning of the dissection, analysis, study of the monster. It began then; it had never finished. Some of what you had learned from it was merely important; some of the rest—vital.

You had learned, for example, never to swim further with a snorkel than you could swim back without one. You learned never to burden yourself with the unnecessary in an emergency: even a hand or a foot might be as expendable as a gun; pride was expendable, dignity was. You learned never to dive alone, even if They laugh at you, even if you have to shoot a fish yourself and say afterwards "we" shot it. Most of all, you learned that fear has many fingers, and one of them—a simple one, made of too great a concentration of carbon dioxide in your blood, as from too-rapid breathing in and out of the same tube—is not really fear at all but feels like fear, and can turn into panic and kill you.

Listen, you want to say, listen, there isn't anything wrong with such an experience or with all the study it leads to, because a man who can learn enough from it could become fit enough, cautious enough, foresighted, unafraid, modest, teachable enough to be chosen, to be qualified for—

You lose the thought, or turn it away, because the sick man feels that cold touch deep inside, feels it right now, feels it beyond ignoring, above and beyond anything that you, with all your experience and certainty, could explain to him even if he would listen, which he won't. Make him, then; tell him the cold touch is some simple explainable thing like anoxia, like gladness even: some triumph that he will be able to appreciate when his head is working right again.

Triumph? Here he's alive after . . . whatever it is, and that doesn't seem to be triumph enough, though it was in the Grenadines, and that other time, when he got the bends, saved his own life, saved two other lives. Now, somehow, it's not the same: there seems to be a reason why just being alive afterwards isn't a triumph.

Why not triumph? Because not twelve, not twenty, not even thirty minutes is it taking the satellite to complete its eighth-of-an-orbit: fifty minutes are gone, and still there's a slice of shadow yonder. It is this, *this* which is placing the cold finger upon his heart, and he doesn't know why, he doesn't know why, he *will* not know why; he is afraid he shall when his head is working again . . .

Oh, where's the kid? Where is any way to busy the mind, apply it to something, anything else but the watchhand which outruns the moon? Here, kid: come over here—what you got there?

If you were the kid, then you'd forgive everything and hunker down with your new model, not a toy, not a helicopter or a rocket-plane, but the big one, the one that looks like an overgrown cartridge. It's so big, even as a model, that even an angry sick man wouldn't call it a toy. A giant cartridge, but watch: the lower four-fifths is Alpha—all muscle—over a million pounds thrust. (Snap it off, throw it away.) Half the rest is Beta—all brains—it puts

you on your way. (Snap it off, throw it away.) And now look at the polished fraction which is left. Touch a control somewhere and see—see? it has wings—wide triangular wings. This is Gamma, the one with wings, and on its back is a small sausage; it is a moth with a sausage on its back. The sausage (click! it comes free) is Delta. Delta is the last, the smallest: Delta is the way home.

What will they think of next? Quite a toy. Quite a toy. Beat it, kid. The satellite is almost overhead, the sliver of shadow going—going—almost gone and . . . gone.

Check: 0459. Fifty-nine minutes?, give or take a few. Time eight . . . 472 . . . is, uh, 7 hours 52 minutes.

Seven hours fifty-two minutes? Why, there isn't a satellite round earth with a period like that. In all the solar system there's only . . .

The cold finger turns fierce, implacable.

The east is paling and the sick man turns to it, wanting the light, the sun, an end to questions whose answers couldn't be looked upon. The sea stretches endlessly out to the growing light, and endlessly, somewhere out of sight, the surf roars. The paling east bleaches the sandy hilltops and throws the line of footprints into aching relief. That would be the buddy, the sick man knows, gone for help. He can not at the moment recall who the buddy is, but in time he will, and meanwhile the footprints make him less alone.

The sun's upper rim thrusts itself above the horizon with a flash of green, instantly gone. There is no dawn, just the green flash and then a clear white blast of unequivocal sunup. The sea could not be whiter, more still, if it were frozen and snow-blanketed. In the west, stars still blaze, and overhead the crinkled satellite is scarcely abashed by the growing light. A formless jumble in the valley below begins to resolve itself into a sort of tent-city, or installation of some kind, with tube-like and sail-like buildings. This would have meaning for the sick man if his head were working right. Soon, it would. Will. (Oh . . .)

The sea, out on the horizon just under the rising sun, is behaving strangely, for in that place where properly belongs a pool of unbearable brightness, there is instead a notch of brown. It is as if the white fire of the sun is drinking dry the sea—for look, look! the notch becomes a bow and the bow a crescent, racing ahead of the sunlight, white sea ahead of it and behind it a cocoa-dry stain spreading across and down toward where he watches.

Beside the finger of fear which lies on him, another finger places itself, and another, making ready for that clutch, that grip, that ultimate insane squeeze of panic. Yet beyond that again, past that squeeze when it comes, to be savored if the squeeze is only fear and not panic, lies triumph—triumph, and a glory. It is perhaps this which constitutes his whole battle: to fit himself, prepare himself to bear the utmost that fear could do, for if he can do that, there is a triumph on the other side. But . . . not yet. Please, not yet awhile.

Something flies (or flew, or will fly—he is a little confused on this point)

toward him, from the far right where the stars still shine. It is not a bird and it is unlike any aircraft on earth, for the aerodynamics are wrong. Wings so wide and so fragile would be useless, would melt and tear away in any of earth's atmosphere but the outer fringes. He sees then (because he prefers to see it so) that it is the kid's model, or part of it, and for a toy, it does very well indeed.

It is the part called Gamma, and it glides in, balancing, parallels the sand and holds away, holds away slowing, then settles, all in slow motion, throwing up graceful sheet-fountains of fine sand from its skids. And it runs along the ground for an impossible distance, letting down its weight by the ounce and stingily the ounce, until *look out* until a skid *look out* fits itself into a bridged crevasse *look out, look out!* and still moving on, it settles down to the struts. Gamma then, tired, digs her wide left wingtip carefully into the racing sand, digs it in hard; and as the wing breaks off, Gamma slews, sidles, slides slowly, pointing her other triangular tentlike wing at the sky, and broadside crushes into the rocks at the valley's end.

As she rolls smashing over, there breaks from her broad back the sausage, the little Delta, which somersaults away to break its back upon the rocks, and through the broken hull, spill smashed shards of graphite from the moderator of her power-pile. *Look out! Look out!* and at the same instant from the finally checked mass of Gamma there explodes a doll, which slides and tumbles into the sand, into the rocks and smashed hot graphite from the wreck of Delta.

The sick man numbly watches this toy destroy itself: what will they think of next?—and with a gelid horror prays at the doll lying in the raging rubble of the atomic pile: *don't stay there, man—get away! get away! that's hot, you know?* But it seems like a night and a day and half another night before the doll staggers to its feet and, clumsy in its pressure-suit, runs away up the valley-side, climbs a sand-topped outcrop, slips, falls, lies under a slow cascade of cold ancient sand until, but for an arm and the helmet, it is buried.

The sun is high now, high enough to show the sea is not a sea, but brown plain with the frost burned off it, as now it burns away from the hills, diffusing in air and blurring the edges of the sun's disk, so that in a very few minutes there is no sun at all, but only a glare in the east. Then the valley below loses its shadows, and like an arrangement in a diorama, reveals the form and nature of the wreckage below: no tent-city this, no installation, but the true real ruin of Gamma and the eviscerated hulk of Delta. (Alpha was the muscle, Beta the brain; Gamma was a bird, but Delta, Delta was the way home.)

And from it stretches the line of footprints, to and by the sick man, above to the bluff, and gone with the sandslide which had buried him there. Whose footprints?

He knows whose, whether or not he knows that he knows, or wants to or not. He knows what satellite has (give or take a bit) a period like that (want it exactly?—it's 7.66 hours). He knows what world has such a night, and

such a frosty glare by day. He knows these things as he knows how spilled radioactives will pour the crash and mutter of surf into a man's earphones.

Say you were that kid: say, instead, at last, that you are the sick man, for they are the same; surely then you can understand why of all things, even while shattered, shocked, sick with radiation calculated (leaving) radiation computed (arriving) and radiation past all bearing (lying in the wreckage of Delta) you would want to think of the sea. For no farmer who fingers the soil with love and knowledge, no poet who sings of it, artist, contractor, engineer, even child bursting into tears at the inexpressible beauty of a field of daffodils—none of these is as intimate with Earth as those who live on, live with, breathe and drift in its seas. So of these things you must think; with these you must dwell until you are less sick and more ready to face the truth.

The truth, then, is that the satellite fading here is Phobos, that those footprints are your own, that there is no sea here, that you have crashed and are killed and will in a moment be dead. The cold hand ready to squeeze and still your heart is not anoxia or even fear, it is death. Now, if there is something more important than this, now is the time for it to show itself.

The sick man looks at the line of his own footprints, which testify that he is alone, and at the wreckage below, which states that there is no way back, and at the white east and the mottled west and the paling fleck-like satellite above. Surf sounds in his ears. He hears his pumps. He hears what is left of his breathing. The cold clamps down and folds him round past measuring, past all limits.

Then he speaks, cries out: then with joy he takes his triumph at the other side of death, as one takes a great fish, as one completes a skilled and mighty task, rebalances at the end of some great daring leap; and as he used to say "we shot a fish" he uses no "I":

"God," he cries, dying on Mars, "God, we made it!"



Rex Lardner . . .

AMERICAN PLAN

a bedtime story of the future . . .

"YOUR name is John," I said.

"What *would* it be?" He spoke out of the right side of his mouth, over his shoulder. He seemed brusque, even for a late-hour hackie.

I leaned back uncomfortably on the hard rear seat. "Oh . . . seeing this is Mars, I thought you might have a name like Zrrrk or Srrrm," I said with a mollifying smile. "Or maybe Ooosh."

"Well, it's *John*, buddy. You could read."

The photo on the back of the front seat was the only one I had ever seen of a Martian—somehow they're never in the news back on Earth. Whimsically I thought that to me every Martian's photo would probably look the same, though it would be bad manners to admit it. And I was cosmopolitan enough, even if this was my first trip to another planet, to realize that most Americans probably looked the same to Martians.

"You spell it the same way we do," I said pleasantly.

"How the hell *else* would you spell it? With a Q?" He laughed raucously up front and I stared out the window.

Puppeta-puppeta-pup went the primitive internal-combustion engine as we lurched over rutty roads to Krokol, the capital and most modern city on the planet—the only one, I'd been cautioned by my conscientious travel agent, where you didn't have to boil the water before drinking it. Martian beer, made of fermented hjar, was supposed to be both tasty and cheap, however. In the flickery light of the larger moon (not as big as ours), the tall, dark dunes of the prairie seemed to bounce by, punctuated in the distance by shadowy mesas. Not a sign of habitation yet.

"Listen, John," I said, leaning forward a little. "The guy at the travel bureau told me that besides all the cultural sights in Krokol there were some wild doings in the Tenderloin district of the city. Nothing outright—you know? But he gave me a kind of big wink. To sort of get the entire *flavor* of Mars, if you know what I mean. I suppose you know all about the off-beat sights, being a taxi driver and all."

He turned around, his slit-like eyes boring into mine. He stared so long (though it was probably not more than five seconds) that I thought he would

run us into a ditch. "Yeah, I know a couple spots," he said. "But it's too late tonight for any kind of action. You're better off going straight to your hotel and doing the tourist bit tomorrow night."

A series of nasty jolting bumps took his attention (and mine, too) for a moment, then he continued, over his shoulder, "But if you want, I could pick you up around ten and I'll park the heap somewhere and take you to a couple of real wild spots." He turned around and stared. "If that's what you want."

I had no intention of touring Downtown Krokol with a misanthropic hackie, no matter how knowledgeable, so I said, "Let me take a rain check on that, John."

"What the hell is a rain check?"

"I forgot—you don't have rain here, or baseball. It's an American expression meaning I have to postpone my decision." The thought struck me that maybe Mars' whole trouble was that the poor inhabitants had to spend half their time trying to manufacture water, and that's why they were so backward civilizationwise. Although their culture, being very old, was supposed to be quite okay with a lot of interesting ruins.

"All right. Take down the number. If I'm out, talk to Henry. He's the dispatcher—"

"Henry!"

"For cryin' out loud, buddy—" He turned in irritation and took a deep breath. "He'll put you onto another guide."

I made a show of copying down the number and he faced front. I would have to get the names of lively spots from the hotel manager or from some other American tourist, I figured. John didn't strike me as someone who would wear well for an entire evening.

Now the tall, slender spires of Martian buildings and skyscrapers hove into view (like bristles on a sea urchin, I thought), taller by far than ours in New York and Baltimore—but if we had Mars' low gravity and stable sub-surface magma, I'm sure we could build towers three times as high. He caught me looking.

"Pretty high up, hunh, buddy?" As though he had personally designed and built every one of them. Before I could answer he had jerked to a stop in front of a high building that had a sign on it saying "Commandant Hotel" and over which were some complex Martian hieroglyphics.

"Here we are, buddy. . . . Not that side!" he shouted as I started to try the left-hand door. Irritated I slid over to the right, impatiently pressed a button and the right-hand door slid open. (For all their vaunted culture, the Martians haven't invented hinges yet.) I paid him what the meter said, plus exactly fifteen per cent more. After a bumpy two-hour ride he could see I was in no mood for haggling, so he merely clamped his fist over the money with a dissatisfied grunt, pocketed it and roared off in a cloud of black exhaust fumes.

I raised my head and sniffed the chill air. So this was Mars! Deserted streets, a dark sky illumined by their main moon, with the little-bitty one

rising out of the east, the spires across the street even darker outlines against the sky. Silence except for the screech of John's wheels as he careened around a corner a few blocks away.

I turned to enter the hotel, but a thin, stooped Martian with a definite cast to one eye barred the way.

"Me you freng," he said in a whisper. Importuning, his cheek atwilt, he tried to beckon me over to one side. "Me you freng. Take you see what nobody else can show." I moved past him impatiently. He sidled out of the way but, trying a different tack, called after me in an urgent whisper, "Me freng. Listen. You like my sista?" He bounded up to me at the hotel door. "She like you. Listen. Five zotls, no more." He tried to assume what I suppose, in a Martian, was a look of solicitous sincerity, but I was having none of it. The offer was not the least bit tempting. (I only hoped his sister did not have the misfortune to resemble him.) And for all I knew, in some dark corner of the city I might be set on by hoodlums, robbed and dumped into a canal somewhere.

At the desk the night clerk, in a dark, slightly threadbare suit, was scribbling something on a pad.

"Even on Mars!" I murmured, loud enough for him to hear.

"Sir?" He thrust his pen down, looking, I am sure, full of eager efficiency.

"I was just noticing that even on Mars there's never a bellhop around when you want one."

"It's quite late, sir. . . . You have a reservation, of course." He gazed at me blankly.

The idea of traveling millions of miles through space and *not* having a reservation was amusing and I chuckled. "Of course, Earp B. Morgan."

"M, M, M, M." From under the desk he produced a long list of names and soberly ran a forefinger down it. "Ah, yes, yes, yes, yes." He swiveled the ledger around and I signed directly beneath a Fred Smith, from North Tonawanda, New York. The scratching of the pen was interrupted by the clerk's imperious clanging of the bell several times.

"Here he comes, sir. *Finally*." He swiveled the ledger around again with a precise gesture and stared at the signature.

A small bellhop with shiny brass buttons came into the lobby with a hustling gait and the clerk tossed him the key.

"Incidentally," I said. "My luggage. Has it come yet?"

"From the spaceport? No sir, not yet. The visitor's luggage generally arrives about a half-hour after *he* does. It's inefficient, but—" his lips broke apart in a grin—"customs of the country." He couldn't suppress a giggle and I smiled forbearingly at his, I presume, well-nurtured humor. "If it's all right with you, sir, we'll send it up in the morning."

I nodded. "Say," I said, as a thought struck me, "many Americans stop here?" Already—three hours on Mars!—I was nostalgic for the sound of an American accent.

"Oh, yes sir. We're considered the finest hotel in Krokol. So naturally our clientele has a large percentage of American guests. By the way, sir,

would you wish to leave any valuables or interplanetary tourist checks in our office safe?"

I told him I thought not and indicated to the bellhop we should be on our way. He let me precede him into an empty elevator, then pushed one of a hundred buttons. The doors hissed closed and we rose creakily.

"What's my room number?"

"7103, sir."

We seemed to go up and up and up.

"You're from America, sir?" he asked, with deference.

"Yes. How'd you know?"

"By your accent, sir."

I was amused by his diplomacy. After a wheezing glide and some rattling, the elevator stopped and the door rustled open. Thinking about bed more than anything else, I preceded him out, then followed him as he padded down a long hallway lit by some glowy chemical that wasn't too luminous. We got into another elevator and started down. Taking a deep breath, I tried not to be annoyed at all this rigmarole.

"I was surprised the taxi-driver's name was John," I said.

"My name is Harry, sir."

"John, Harry. That's a good one."

We seemed to be going down, down, down.

"Incidentally, sir," he said somewhat shyly, "Mars is a dry planet."

I smiled. "I know. I saw your sand dunes on the way here."

"Not what I mean, sir. I mean you can't buy hard liquor."

"No?" I was amazed. "The guide book sure as hell didn't mention that."

"I'm afraid the guide book isn't too efficient, sir. What I'm getting at, sir, is if you wish bourbon or gin, sir, well, I can get it for you. It's ten zotls a bottle. A fifth, that is."

"Later, maybe. . . . How much further do we drop?"

"We're here, sir."

The door rustled open and we were in a large, dark courtyard. The big moon had moved across the sky, and now the little moon was directly overhead. "Pretty dark," I said.

"Yes, it is, sir." I could vaguely make out his shape in front of me. "We had bad luck with a fuse earlier in the evening. But just follow me. We're almost to your room, sir."

As I peered at his form, slowly moving ahead of me, I thought I heard a faint lowing far to the left and sniffed a pungent but not unpleasant smell. It reminded me of something, but by now I was too weary for puzzles. "You really *rough* it when you go to Mars," I heard myself saying to the fellows over a glass of good bourbon at the Caucus Club back in Baltimore.

Finally we came to a large sandstone building. The passage he led me down was illuminated by more dim lights and I could barely make out the number on the door. It was 7103, to my great relief.

Harry unlocked it and it slid into the wall. The room flickered and became

alive with a yellowish-red light from some hidden source, but I stopped on the threshold.

"Hey!" I said. "There's a man in there!"

"Why, yessir," he said. "We're full up, sir, account of a convention today and tomorrow. Had to double up, sir."

"You didn't tell me!"

"I'm only the bellhop, sir."

"The clerk didn't!"

"He must have forgot, sir." We were talking in loud whispers.

"Well, what the hell!"

"Yessir." He looked as though he could have waited all night. "Want to ring him up, sir? That is, if the videophone works. . . . The fuse."

I thought a moment. "I guess there wouldn't be any more rooms."

"This is the last available, sir."

"Well, I guess I better take it . . . for tonight, anyway."

"As you say, sir."

I went inside, watching him as he climbed up a ladder to a big shallow bowl jutting out from the wall about twelve feet up. He turned on the faucet, looked down for my approval and awkwardly descended.

"Mars is *full* of surprises."

"Sir?"

"No beds."

"No sir."

"You sleep on mats. The floor is all one big mat."

"Yessir, that's what we do here on Mars, sir."

"And no furniture." There was only one thing that looked like a piece of furniture and *that* could have been a mobile. It was a bar suspended from the ceiling.

"I see you've got TV, though." The machine, bolted to the floor, looked like a crude 1950 television set.

"That's the videophone, sir," he corrected me. "For room service. I doubt if it will work tonight."

I stared first at the bellhop, then at the sleeping male figure curled up in his underwear in a far corner of the room, then at the tub. "Here's ten zotls for bourbon," I said. I may need it, I thought. "Bring it in the morning."

"Yessir." He pocketed the money deftly. "Do you wish to be wakened at any special time, sir?"

"Well, I guess about noon—or what passes for noon on this planet."

He hung around. "And here's for you." I handed him a zotl-thirty. He pocketed it without examination, thanked me perfunctorily and started out.

"Oh, by the way, sir." His tone was even more diffident than usual. "May I make a suggestion?"

"What?"

"Your clothes are a little rumpled—I guess from the bumpy taxi ride and the rocket flight—"

"So?"

"Well, sir, we have an excellent six-hour cleaning and pressing service—Korkuvik Brothers. I guarantee to have your suit cleaned and pressed and ready for you to wear by tomorrow noon."

Wearily, after first extracting my wallet, I took off my jacket and trousers and handed them to him. I wished he would get out so I could lie down in my underwear and get some shut-eye, but he had one more piece of information.

"One other thing," he began hesitantly.

I waved a hand at him in a worldly-wise way. "Oh, I've been in hotels before," I told him.

"You may hear a soft knock."

"I shan't answer it."

That seemed to satisfy him. "She's discreet. She won't insist." He handed me the key and, with my clothes folded over his arm, stepped out and slid the door shut. I turned out the light and lay down diagonally across from my companion who, through all this, had not moved a muscle.

So this is Mars! I thought, lying supine in the dark with my fingers laced under my head. The first thing I would do tomorrow—after a hot bath and a shave . . .

I felt my shoulder being shaken, hard. It was a minute before I realized where I was or whom the bleary-eyed face above mine belonged to. It was my companion, still in his underwear.

"Did the bourbon come?"

"No, the bourbon didn't come." He had a Midwestern accent. "I better introduce myself. We'll be seeing a lot of each other."

"Will we?" I sat up and blinked a couple of times in the light.

"I'm Albert Porter from Akron."

"Earp B. Morgan, from Baltimore."

"Glad to know you."

"Glad to know *you*." We shook hands like a couple of tourists.

"How long you been here?" I asked.

"Here? Or on Mars generally? Anyway, it's about the same thing." He smiled a slow smile. "About eighteen months, I guess."

"This sure is different from the Commodore or Cadillac or the Statler back in the States," I said, looking around. "No beds, no TV, no windows, that bathtub—"

"That's not a bathtub," he said with a kind of funny expression. "That's where we eat."

"What a crazy damn place!" I shook my head, laughing. "How do you know if it's day or night, if there's no windows? Have these hicks invented the clock yet?"

He was walking over to the ladder. "I never saw one." The lights gradually got brighter and brighter and the walls became rather mirrorlike. "Must be daytime," he called over his shoulder as he leaned it against the device that hung from the ceiling and carefully climbed up.

"What the hell are you climbing up *there* for?"

"Little exercise," he said.

"How about ordering some breakfast? What do you want?"

"I don't think the videophone works." He had kicked the ladder away and, hanging stiffly by his knees, spoke from an upside-down position. "It hasn't for eighteen months."

I tried it. He was right. "I'm going to give that desk clerk hell," I said.

"Shut up," he ordered. "I've got to concentrate."

He hung by one knee, with the other leg waving stiffly in the air. Then he placed his hands on the bar, drew both legs through his arms, hung for a moment and dropped to the mat on all fours.

"Your face is all blotchy, Porter," I told him.

Soundlessly, he picked up the ladder and placed it against the elevated tub. As he climbed up, a door above it opened and a grayish hunk of something dropped in. He didn't seem at all surprised.

"Is that breakfast?" I asked. "You don't even have to phone for it?" He was busy eating. I climbed halfway up the ladder and he peered down at me with a dark look, his cheeks stuffed.

"This is for me."

"Oh, for God's sake, Porter." I climbed down, feeling angry enough to march down (or in whatever direction it is) to the desk in my underwear to get some satisfaction, but the door wouldn't open and there was no keyhole on the inside.

"What gives?" I yelled at Porter, tugging at it, kicking at it and trying to slide it one way or the other. More damned Martian inefficiency!

Porter shrugged.

"Have you tried it?"

"Yes, I tried it. Several times."

"How the hell am I ever going to get to see the Tenderloin district?" I demanded.

"You're in the middle of it," he said from his perch, stuffing his mouth full of the gray stuff.

"For God's sake, Porter, you look just like a chimp. What about my breakfast?"

His mouth was full of food and I could hardly make out the answer. But he seemed to be saying, roll over, roll over, and you'll find out.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Edgar Pangborn

THE ADVENTURES OF AN ADVANCE
EXPLORATORY TEAM ON A NEW
PLANET

THE RED HILLS OF SUMMER

I

MIRANDA caught my hand, her own soft small hands gone hard with tension. Captain Madison on the speaker's platform had mentioned the pilot mission, and possible lethal elements on the shining dot below us—bacteria, viruses, qualities of the lower atmosphere not discoverable from orbit. It had not dawned on me till then that my troubled Miranda might be desiring the pilot mission for herself and me. For the last year she had been in the shadow of private unhappiness, often remote even when she was in my arms.

Below us. For the first time in fifteen years that word *below* was more than a reference to the place where your feet happened to be. It possessed a meaning in relation to the ship, to me as a unit of living matter, to black-haired Miranda.

Madison's square face recaptured my attention. I had first glimpsed it at the beginning of the voyage, when I came aboard with the unsparing eyes of a boy of twelve. That year he was thirty-five. Now at fifty he looked little changed—more tired, hair grayer, voice flatter. Who wouldn't be tired, after the job of bringing our enormous sphere into a safe orbit? My own healthy red-haired carcass felt exhausted too, from the excitement that had churned in all of us since the planet was sighted and we knew we must

decide whether to risk a descent. We were in the meeting-room now, all three hundred, to make that decision.

I, David Leroy, am not a scientist nor a technician. Miranda and I were Randies—chosen like most of the kids for good health and what the Builders' Directives solemnly call Random Talents. There's a pride in it. You discover the virtues of comprehensive wide-ranging ignorance.

Captain Rupert Madison was saying: "If we go on, I don't suppose any of you, even children born in space, would live to see the end of the journey. The distances are too vast, Earth-type planets too far apart. The chance of finding another as promising as this one, within our lifetime, is small. The other choice is to go down—and stay."

It was that simple. A huge frail sphere like ours, built to transport a colony for generations if necessary, doesn't land anywhere. You don't take it into atmosphere. Compartmented and honeycombed, spheres within spheres down to the core where the computer hummed its mathematical daydreams, the ship *Galileo* was designed for one purpose only: to bear our splinter fragment of humanity away from a world that humanity had apparently ruined, away to some cleaner place where the sickness in our germ plasm might work itself out—perhaps, always perhaps, and only after many generations. That errand performed, the emptied shell of *Galileo* would shine on as a satellite, a golden moon circling a second-chance world.

When you live in close awareness of it for fifteen years, even the new curse of Cain can become a commonplace. But I had been obliged to learn it was not so for Miranda. Her trouble was there, a sense of futility forced on her by the radiation sickness of Earth: for what, her heart said, is the point of a million years of human evolution if it must end not even with a bang, only with the whimper of babies born armless, distorted, blind? She had grown terrified of the times when she couldn't *care* about anything. "Not even about you, Davy . . ."

Captain Madison was hammering home the truth of no return, speaking of what it requires—in terms of industry, labor, raw materials—to build just one launching center like the twelve that toiled eight years to send the bits and pieces of this vessel out of Earth's gravity. Earth had bled herself white for her children, after men once and for all faced the probability of racial extinction. They would build another *Galileo*, and another; would go on doggedly building, all else subordinated, so long as any courage and equipment remained. "The gravity of that planet down there is a bit greater than the gravity of Earth. Launching centers!" Madison said. "I remember. That was my life, you know, from teens into thirties, beginning as a grease monkey at Canaveral . . . Well, you know the arithmetic: three hundred colonists don't reproduce a technology that was based on a population of three billion.

"The know-how? We have it all, in the microfilm library. Raw materials, yes—down there we'll find the same minerals, same general chemical pattern. But the building of launching centers, new ships, the reconquest of space if you want that inflated language—let's say it just might be an enterprise of

our great-great-grandchildren, if we have any, if enough of them are healthy and active human beings, and if space travel happens to be what they want most, at any cost, in their own far-off time."

Nobody sighed or fidgeted, as many would have done if this had been another pep-talk by our Psychometric Coordinator Cecil Dorman, known to Miranda and me and others of the irreverent as Cecil Psycho.

"The planet is habitable," said Captain Madison, "so far as we know from orbit study." Miranda felt my look but would not return it; her hands grasping mine were cold. "So far as we know," he repeated, "in advance of the pilot mission—which will consist of two men and two women who will go down, maintain radio contact at least four weeks, and make the final tests we can't make up here. Your only vote in this meeting, I suppose, will be to decide whether the pilot mission starts at all—remembering that whatever they find, those four volunteers can't come back."

Behind me, I heard the suave voice of Andrea del Sentiero—fifty-eight, the only colonist older than Madison. His official title was Historian. "Does anything in the latest studies suggest a civilization?"

"Nothing, sir. Forest, savannah, large lakes, marshes, deserts, mountain ranges running generally north and south, a few of the summits snow-capped." He was talking for all of us, who had had only brief chances at the telescopes; the view-plate in the panel behind him gave a low magnification, the planet a blur of blue and reddish green. "Six continental land masses paired north and south, three main oceans, polar caps small and broken up. Bound to be dense tropics near the equator, the rest sub-tropical, with narrow temperate zones. No roads in the open areas, nothing like cities. No vessels on the seas, river mouths surrounded by the same vegetation that covers most of the land. The reddish green deepens on the seaward slopes of the hills, but that suggests—Dr. Bunuan agrees—a result of rainfall, not intelligent agriculture. Dr. Bunuan thinks we may find something like Earth in the time of dinosaurs. He calls that a half-educated guess."

"Quarter-educated," the biologist's mellow voice corrected him.

Captain Madison grinned. "If you insist, José. No, Andrea, if there's life at the social, technological level it would have to be hidden under forest cover—unlikely."

"Yes," said del Sentiero. "I have no other questions."

"Maybe something to add?"

"Only two things," said the Historian. "One, that my vote will be for going down and making the best of it. Two, that the pilot mission ought to be a privilege of the old."

Captain Madison winced. "You mean, why risk the young?"

Del Sentiero said nothing. I knew, without seeing, the stoical Latin shrug, the dark eyes contemplating eternity, the mild outward motion of eloquent hands.

"Anyone may volunteer for it," said Madison heavily, and he shut his

eyes, his face freezing into difficult calm. "Responsibility for choosing the four is on me, Andrea, nowhere else." His eyes flew open, probing here and there. "Questions? Discussion?"

I had expected that Paul Cutter would seize this moment to sound off on the revision of the model constitution, which could not even begin to function until after a landing. The constitution was an attempt of the Builders to suggest the framework of such government as a colony of 300 might be expected to need. Mirthless and lonely Paul Cutter had grappled with it, conceiving amendment after amendment, identifying his unhappy self with each improvement to the point of monomania. He ate and drank the constitution, slept and got up with it. At any time his blaring monologue might nail you to the wall explaining how it *must* be amended or the whole expedition would Betray the Human Heritage.

Paul was younger than Miranda and myself, a boy of ten at the start of the voyage. Some hereditary slant made him grow from a normal-looking child into a small bandy-legged man, gnarled, not misshapen but seeming so, a bulging head connected by a weak neck to a tight barrel of torso. A bore, comical and ugly through no fault of his own. He had chosen psychology as his field of specialization, becoming a noisy satellite of Cecil Dorman. Unfortunately for Paul's ambitions, not Dorman but the learned, humorous and peaceful Dr. Carey was boss of the Psychology Department. (*Galileo* was certainly in its way a college; I still think of it so.) Paul Cutter never earned a title: a Randy still, the fact no source of pride to him but an in-growing pain.

I saw Cutter in the front row, big head alertly cocked. Nothing happened. No fresh amendment, no bray of earnest argument. Maybe Cecil Dorman had persuaded him to let the constitution wait a minute or two . . .

We were voting, by a simple show of hands. No opposition. No one could bear the thought of another fifteen years, or another generation, or another century, in space. But I remember that when my own hand went up I was not thinking of that, but of red-green seaward hills, and of the sound of ocean that might resemble what I had heard when I was a boy at Martha's Vineyard watching the loud hurry and change of waves under the sudden winds of September.

I believe this was the only unanimous decision ever taken by the colonists of the planet Demeter.

Madison was speaking evenly: "The pilot mission. You know the Builders' Directives. You know the necessity. We can't take down the whole colony to be destroyed by something not discoverable from orbit. We haven't the means to break out of gravity and come back. Directives recommend the mission consist of two men and two women. Partly to avoid trusting the judgment of one volunteer. Partly because one sex might be immune to a lethal factor that would kill the other. Partly on the chance that the four might pull through with their survival equipment, and multiply, even if they had to tell the rest of us to stay away. So I want four guinea-pigs. Whoever

they are, they'll be four individuals whom we love and can't spare. I am now calling for them."

This was the way it came, like all great questions, not with trumpets but plainly spoken and quiet as morning. I thought at first there was also a question in Miranda's brown-eyed gaze, one not weighted toward yes or no. Then I understood she was not asking me: *Are you going to stand up?* She was silently saying: *I must do this, I'm driven from within. Whether you stand up or not, Davy, I must and I will.*

I took her hand again and I was on my feet.

Five or six other couples were standing, and a surprising number, ten or a dozen, stood up alone. I heard a murmuring, voices here and there attempting the unsayable, as Rupert Madison looked us over through his captain's mask.

I supposed he would choose the volunteers from among the Randies. Breezy Arthur Clay for instance, standing alone two rows ahead of us, solemn as I had never seen him. Or Joe and Miriam Somers, solidly married with the formalities Miranda had never quite wanted for us, decent, unexciting Joe and Miriam who rather thought they'd like to be farmers if we ever landed. Or Laurette Vieuxtemps, a housewife temperament but not committed to any man, religious, reservedly sweet.

Madison told a few of them—all specialists—to sit down. Then he appeared to have reached a private impasse, brooding in his loneliness. Fussy and dapper Cecil Dorman, on the platform with him, leaned forward suggesting something, and shriveled in Madison's glare. Madison would not be saying again, in words, where responsibility lay, but the Psychometric Coordinator was just the one guy who wouldn't understand it unless he got his nose rubbed in it twice. Madison sighed and spoke names.

Just names. No request to sit down.

"Paul Cutter." I was unready to understand. I had not noticed till then that Paul Cutter had risen; his squat form had been hidden by Art Clay. "Laurette Vieuxtemps . . ." Miranda's fingers gripped tightly. I did understand. "Miranda Klein . . . David Leroy."

II

David Leroy, pilot. I had a title . . .

I don't recall much about the entry into atmosphere. I remember a tight-sealed pocket of heat skimming interminably above a world that gradually expanded in the viewplates above my controls. I remember fear, doubt of my own skill based on nothing but years of theoretical drill without experience. Most clearly, I recall Captain Madison's voice, linked to me by the tenuous nerve of radio, a true part of me, the one part that remained unshaken.

I had known there would be breaks in communication—static interference, other difficulties—and there was one when Madison was on the other side of the planet. No foreknowledge can prepare you for such a loneliness. Yet

I'd always been lonely, like Miranda, like everyone else, a single human planet in the galaxy of the human race.

Then Madison, remote and *above*, in an orbit become incredibly *swift* relative to my *slow*, was speaking again. I was able to give him a much lower temperature reading, a respectably diminished altitude. He said: "You're past the worst. How do you feel?"

"Fine, dandy and lonesome." I glanced in the mirror that gave me the cabin. "Others in good shape. Colonizing with no pain."

"You'll be over that plateau in six minutes, then test your power. Better not use it much till you're down to say 90,000—but that's up to you, Davy. From here on you play it by the seat of your pants."

"I'll do that, Captain."

"We won't try calling from the blind side again. Reestablish contact 0940 hours *Galileo* time." Then with some dry noise that might have been static: "See you, boy."

Below me, ocean and red-green land, an infinity of brooding day. I found the 40-mile oval of my target, and tested the power in a long cautious turn—no trouble. Trust the Builders for that.

The Builders? There was no one, no one at all to trust except Miranda Klein, Laurette Vieuxtemps, Paul Cutter and myself. The Builders were finished with us, had done their magnificent best fifteen years ago, and by now many of them would be dead, and, groping somewhere through the unthinkable reaches, there might be a *Galileo II*, even a *Galileo III*. I would not think now about the Builders, who had known

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they could have no reward except consciousness of a piece of good work completed . . .

Our chosen landing spot was a roughly oval plateau, 40 miles at the greatest length, on one of the three continents of the southern hemisphere. It had been selected by the Council of *Galileo*—del Sentiero presiding, we four volunteers awkwardly attending. The choice had to be partly arbitrary, for the photographic map showed little to suggest that any one spot in the temperate belts would be better than another. I favored the notion of an island, but kept my Randy mouth shut. Del Sentiero suggested the same thing and was overruled: aircraft fuel would give out before our technology could replace it, the building of ships might be difficult, we might even find no suitable timber. And a plateau is, in a way, an island.

My turn carried us out over the sea, then inland, miles above the white summits of a mountain range that rose to the west of our plateau. I cut the power and we drifted soundless in the thickening air.

The plateau lay 30 miles in from the sea. Vegetation covered most of it, but reddish-white patches suggested open ground, possibly sand. We had noticed the same pinkish tinge on many of the ocean beaches. Easy for landing (I hoped) and an easy mark for *Galileo* to hold in observation. Westward for 500 miles spread the random masses of the mountains, our plateau a midget among their numberless foothills.

Prevailing winds in the southern hemisphere blew westward as on Earth; Dr. Bunuan was surely right in assuming plentiful rainfall on the seaward slopes. The region west of the range was no desert, however, but deep forest, 800 miles of it, divided by the silver furrow of a river flowing south. That forest ended at another, narrower range, following the continent's western shore. Our plateau stood at the 45th parallel south, where the continent dwindled in a triangular pattern rather like South America. No land bridge to the continent in the northern hemisphere, and no continental mass at the south polar region, but a myriad scattered islands, and drift ice, and occasional stretches of blue sea all the way to the pole.

"Handling right?" I had known Paul Cutter would be the first and only one to forget Madison's order about letting me alone on this job. I didn't mind the distraction; the little ship was gliding with almost no need of attention. I did mind the jitters in Paul's crashing voice.

I said: "Yes. You people happy back there?"

"Happy as three ticks on a dog—you're the dog." The voice I wanted, Miranda's. It went on, cool but not too sharp: "Let's keep a cork in it, Paul—the man's busy."

Wounded to the core, Paul boomed: "Sorry! Sorry!"

Two birds, or creatures in the shape of birds, were circling between me and the plateau, as a hawk soars, with unmoving wings. Frightened perhaps by our descending gleam, they sped away downwind—at least I thought, from the gust of speed without wing-motion, that they were heading downwind, and I tried to remember the games of seagulls over Martha's Vineyard.

Only the color returned to me and the sense of an airy freedom, the taste of salt wind, the brown ghost of a Portuguese boy who used to play with me.

The smooth course of the ship told me nothing—maybe no wind at all was blowing. Maybe it was blowing some other way at a lower altitude. I saw no wind-motion of the forest, but I was still too high to be certain.

And too low to look down any longer on the mountain-tops. They were above me and would remain above me.

The spot of open ground I had selected for landing was the only one beginning at an edge of the plateau. If the wind was right—where *was* the wind?—I would circle out beyond the edge, come in slightly above it, and still have two miles clear for a landing. With this trim vessel, Madison said, I could manage with less than a thousand yards. But where was the wind?

The time to swing out beyond the plateau was now, right now. The plane made the turn in graceful ease—and dropped, hideously.

I think I yelled it was just an air pocket. But when I lurched out of it we were bound straight for the sullen wall of the plateau. In panic I somehow slammed the power on in time, and ran scared up a channel of hell like a dragonfly on fire. We cleared the cliff by a yard and shot a thousand feet up before I had the wits to level off and cut the jets. Paul was howling: "God Almighty, you almost—"

Miranda's voice came small and cold: "Have a tranquillizer, Paul, it's on the house. Have you noticed, by the way, we're all right?"

I began talking myself, though, when I realized I'd forgotten to lower the landing gear. The talk did me good. I got the gear down. I soared out further beyond the plateau, came in higher, ready for the air pocket, hitting it again and coming out happy, skittering over half a mile of reddish white and touching down in a landing soft as a baby's kiss. Miranda said: "Davy, when you get around to it, explain me some of those nouns and adjectives, huh? I thought I knew 'em all."

We equalized the pressure, a difference too small to bother the eardrums, and breathed the unknown atmosphere—nothing to gain by delaying. It was wild, warm, the freshness wholly sweet. I could have sat there half an hour doing nothing but breathe the air of Demeter—and wondering whether in a few weeks we would be voting on that name, a poetic whim of Andrea del Sentiero.

The stuff outside was mostly sand, sparse red grains mingled with the white. Miranda whispered: "Be first to set your foot on it." It seemed unimportant, a thing I might do to please her—until I had done it. Then absurd pride startled me, and I held up my arms for her.

Laurette and Paul emerged, Laurette moving away from us, looking toward the mountains in the west—praying I think, or merely wanting a small time of solitude. She had talked with the chaplain during most of our last hour on *Galileo*. Miranda and I had spent that time with the half dozen

friends who had been closest to us through the voyage—not saying goodbye; they all wanted to take it for granted they would rejoin us in four weeks. Paul Cutter had employed the hour furiously writing in a corner of the common room—some intense document which he delivered into Madison's keeping. "Not to be opened," he blared for all of us to hear, "except in the event that *Galileo* must proceed without us." Captain Madison took it gravely, probably with no smothered impulse to laugh, and shook hands with the hero.

Impossible that I could ever have looked down on those mountain peaks. Yet I had done so. I would remember it.

Miranda kicked off her right shoe, pressed her bare foot in the reddish sand, drew it away, gazed curiously at the dainty human imprint. I asked: "Are you caring now?"

She held my shoulder, putting back the shoe; watched me a while with midnight eyes; said: "I think I am . . . Let's walk off a way."

We approached the somber edge of the woods. "You'd know it," I said, "wouldn't you, dear? You wouldn't just think."

"Maybe." She was frowning gravely at the sand, not wanting to touch me or be touched. "You've felt it yourself, Davy, that emptiness. Impulse to give up because nothing can make much difference."

"Sometimes. I found I could push it away by studying something new—holing up in the library—talking to del Sentiero."

"I couldn't. Not the last year anyway. It was partly the ship, the monotony. Suspended animation." She looked about rather blindly into the depth of morning. "We're—home, aren't we?"

"Yes."

"It wasn't only the ship. I kept thinking, even if we can have a baby, there'll be—ah, what do the damn Directives call it?—70 per cent chance of normal birth. I remember hearing my father say that even the 70 per cent was a sort of statistician's lie. The dice are loaded, Davy. . . . I loved Earth. You did too. I know. Inside me somewhere I've got every word you ever said about Martha's Vineyard. . . . Davy, it's just barely possible I'm pregnant. I can't be sure, hasn't been time, quite." She wanted nearness then, twisting her fingers in my shirt, clinging, suddenly crying. "Let it be true, Davy! Let it be right, not a—not a 30-per-center. I'd care—I'd care then!"

It meant nothing to Paul Cutter that she was crying in my arms. I felt his tap on my shoulder, his brazen voice exploding: "Who is leader?"

Miranda laughed; looked past me at the little man and laughed, with brimming eyes—which puzzled the hell out of him. Simply Paul's way. He was incapable of understanding other people's urgencies.

I straightened my face, suggesting that for the moment we hardly needed leadership: we all knew what work was to be done, maybe we'd already done the biggest part by breathing the air and continuing to live. I looked at my watch. "*Galileo* will be calling in fifteen minutes. Until then why

don't we just look around? Only we'd better break out some armament, I suppose."

I should have thought of that sooner, too. The bland quiet here made the idea of guns downright obscene. Nothing was stirring. Two bird-like things soared high overhead, maybe curious at the alien brightness of our plane. The lack of vegetation at this landing spot puzzled me. In places the ground was clay instead of sand; small stones resembling the granites and composites of Earth lay here and there. Nothing suggested animal life. In a spot higher than the rest of the open land, I noticed a boulder thrusting from the ground and a wraith of vapor rising from it to dissolve in the still air. A geyser, perhaps, that periodically flooded the area, killing plant life. The trees, and the rim of very dark grass between them and the open ground, looked rich and healthy.

The trees were in the pattern of Earth, but I saw no such complex of a thousand species as in forests of the old world. One type was completely dominant, a broad-leaf tree averaging fifty feet in height, thick-trunked, spreading only at the top, the young leaves and twigs red as maple buds, the mature leaves a hemlock green with wide red veining. The grass was like Earth's except for its darkness, shading almost to a cobalt blue; it grew hardly a foot high, dense as carpet-pile. We had seen that color solid in most of the open areas of the plateau, and it was the characteristic hue of the savannahs elsewhere on the planet.

We opened a storage compartment of the plane. Paul and I slung light carbines; Miranda strapped on a .32 automatic. The bullets for all three were designed to fragment on impact, releasing an anesthetic poison that would stop anything if the wound failed to—anything with an Earth-type bloodstream. Laurette Vieuxtemps, when I called her, smiled and shook her head.

"Will you stand by the radio then, Laurette, till they call in?"

"Yes." She was good with instruments, deft and careful; delicate tests on soil and plants would be part of her work. She returned to the plane, after a last glance at the hills, their red-green mystery, cloud-trailing spires brilliant with snow.

I said: "I don't like carrying this thing either, Laurette. But just at first I don't want any of us wandering out here unarmed."

Laurette nodded amiably. And Paul Cutter said with some clang of bitterness: "Well, Dave, you've answered my question."

"I'm not leader unless you all three agree to it."

I think I spoke with friendliness. I meant to; we had need of it. His face, turned toward me in the mild heat of the sun of Demeter, had gone opaque. Miranda's arm slid around me; she studied the ground, perhaps waiting. Paul said politely, with none of his normal stridency: "Four weeks, they said. I agree you should be leader, for four weeks."

III

At the close of the second day we imagined we knew a little about that plateau. I had hedgehopped over it twice, beginning to enjoy the plane, except for the always rugged instant of landing.

I flew alone both times—no sense risking two lives with an inexperienced pilot. In the first one I proved that the only part of the plateau safe for the larger landing ships of *Galileo* was the one I had first chosen. Then I indulged myself in a 30-mile flight to the sea above the course of a small river that skirted the northern base of the plateau and wound down through the piedmont past rolling land, meadow and forest, meeting the ocean at a harbor a mile wide. Madison wanted to know more about that harbor.

A small hilly island stood twenty miles out to sea from it, hazy and purple in the sun. It pulled me, called me. I was thinking, I know, of Martha's Vineyard. I thought also of fuel, danger, the need of my people for this plane and for me too; and I did not go.

On my flight to the harbor I noticed a few tawny deerlike animals bounding into the woods away from the shadow of the plane, and some flying creatures, none very close. On the way back something different showed itself, night-black, lizard-shaped, basking in a sunny meadow. I circled down for a better look. Hugely unconcerned, it did not retreat when I skimmed over it sixty feet up. Not dead, for I saw the great triangle of the head moving, and a twitch of a saurian tail. I shot up then; the sudden clamor of the jets did not disturb it. I guessed the length at twenty-five feet.

We slept in the plane on the first night. My second flight, next day, was for study of a smaller open area two miles from our landing site, that looked reasonable for a camp. It was a clearing of level dark grass half a mile square with a brook slipping across the northern side, widening to a pond near the edge of the woods. I landed and explored.

The pond-water shone deep ruby, reflecting red-leaved bushes. I found the banks pockmarked with prints of small divided hoofs, and noticed one set of tracks with pads and claw-marks, not frighteningly large. Mammals or something like them lived in this land, knew fear, ate each other, bred, died. I remembered my black lizard, his vastness curved rather like a question-mark.

The forms would be new to me. The forms themselves would change, must already have done so through millions of years in the manner of Earth. So far as I knew, so far as I know today, the meaning, if there was one, would be the same.

I was bothered by the absence of anything like humanly edible plants. Maybe the forest would take care of that. Here I found only the short grass and a few of the red-leaved bushes that grew by the pond. I brought a shovel from the plane and drove it into the sod. The loosened earth displayed brown worms, legless grubs, nothing like ants or beetles. In any such region

on Earth I would have encountered a hundred forms of insect life. Grasshoppers would have shot up around my feet; bees and flies would have buzzed near me; beetles would have scampered away from the shovel. The grassblades should have been scarred by the nibbling of tiny mouths; butterflies ought to have been drifting and fluttering in innocent splendor.

No bugs. I supposed I could do without them . . .

The earth under the grass was dark, rich-looking, with a pleasing aromatic smell. We must learn what it could do. I collected a sample of pond water for testing and returned to the others. That was near noon of the second day.

By evening we had moved to that clearing and set up our camp around a light dome shelter—astonishingly large, strong against storms, capable of lasting indefinitely under any conditions the Builders could imagine for a planet that was bound to be much like their own.

We set out a wire-covered pen for a pair of rabbits, potential food. Those, and a few mice and rats for experiment, were the only animals that shared the pilot mission. From *Galileo* would come sheep, chickens, a few precious cattle of a recently developed breed hardly bigger than goats. Other animals would arrive (if anything arrived to join us) in the form of frozen ova and sperm that our skill might or might not be able to bring to maturity—still a rudimentary art when we left Earth.

These outside bunnies were pilot bunnies. Our three other pairs must get along on *Galileo* rations until we were sure the first pair was thriving. Laurette set up her miniature laboratory for soil and water tests. Paul Cutter dug magnificently until the light began to fail. I felt now a kind of permanency and sense of achievement, and Miranda felt it too, working like a little dynamo at whatever came to hand.

Toward sundown I roved the whole clearing again, with the carbine, not wanting it until I noticed the sun of Demeter slipping beyond the mountains, then pleased enough to be carrying that slim bit of functional wickedness. Once or twice I heard small life scuttering away in the grass, but if Demeter was blessed with field mice I didn't see them. We had set our camp not too near the pond; we wanted the wild things to continue using it if they would. As I approached it now, I thought I glimpsed some of those "deer" slipping into the shadows. Later we must shoot a few, for science if not for food. I felt no fear, only pleasure and curiosity, when a night flier, like a bat or bird, hurried over me and flickered into evening light above the trees. . . .

And before dawn on the third day, Miranda was ill.

She woke me before sunrise, during Paul's tour of guard duty. I could barely see her face. She was speaking soberly, carefully, as if describing someone else's trouble—pain in the right leg, in the right foot a numbness that had started as an itching, and now the beginning of fever, headache, nausea.

Under the light of my lantern, the sole of her right foot looked inflamed, but at that time I found no break in the skin; the leg was reddened up to the knee. She said she was afraid of blacking out, and her voice was blurring—but it was Miranda who had the wits to remember how she had made that barefoot imprint on the sand of our landing place.

By mid-morning, near the time of our next radio contact with *Galileo*, she was unconscious. No signs of pain or delirium. She was unreachable, breathing too rapidly in a fevered sleep.

We had given her MH-12, for lack of anything better, and because it's the most generally useful and safe of the antibiotics developed on Earth. Then Laurette had searched the medical information in our "library"—*Galileo's* great microfilm library cut to the essentials. We could expect no precise help there, since the diseases of Earth would not be paralleled closely enough for proper guidance, but what Laurette found concerning Earth's tropical fevers did give me the idea of searching Miranda's foot with a hand-lens. I discovered a puncture so small that without the lens I had missed it completely. It seemed to be a true eschar with a definite center. It could have been made by an infinitesimal wood or mineral sliver, admitting some poison latent in the ground, or it could have been the bite of an organism hidden under the sand or too tiny to see. For what it was worth, and so far as I could endure it, I might then consider the scrub typhus that was endemic in some regions of Earth's tropics, a rickettsial disease carried by a mite no bigger than a grain of pepper.

I remembered my black lizard in the meadow. I would take him on any time in preference to this. No man is born with any skill at fighting shadows. You have to learn it, and always the hard way.

I could not look at the implications. I could only stand by and wait for Miranda to come back to me; to bring back, if it might be so, the meaning and the purpose I knew I was losing. It was not a case of thinking how I loved her: that was deep-down, bloodstream knowledge requiring no thought, and to think of it then would have made me even more useless in trying to help her.

I was with her—needing to fight, and no antagonist; needing to talk with her, and she could not know it—when I heard the noise of Paul Cutter, subdued because it came from within the plane. Laurette had just rejoined me by Miranda's cot in the shelter; Paul would be talking to *Galileo*, and a black uneasiness vaguely telepathic nudged me to rise. "Stay with her, Laurette," I said, and hurried for the plane.

I saw him at the radio, the prominent, somehow pathetic cords at the back of his neck, his heavy head wobbling a little, his voice attempting a casualness denied by that tremor and by his sweating hands. He was saying: "Yes, the rabbits go for the grass and they're thriving. What? . . . Oh sure, everyone's fine. We—"

He jumped a foot when my fingers dug at his shoulder. I nodded at the transmitter, and he croaked: "Here's Lcroy—wants to talk to you." He

lurched away, but an animal warning of danger reached me—perhaps he made some half-completed motion. I drew the automatic I was carrying and held it aimed at his heart while I talked to the Captain.

Paul slumped to his haunches and dropped his face on his knees. I told Madison as quickly as I could about Miranda, and he said: "I'll switch you to Dr. Dana, he's right here—then I want to talk to you again, Dave."

Dr. Dana helped me—just the voice and the manner. I could imagine I was in touch with the three thousand years of his tradition; out of space, that was Hippocrates talking. He questioned me, approving what we had done, suggesting other supportive measures. He admitted no other important measures were possible, since we knew nothing of the disease, hence nothing of the prognosis. He agreed it might be similar in some ways to Earth's tropical fevers, though when I mentioned scrub typhus he roared at me to forget that. But then he mentioned methods of searching the dead sand area for a guilty organism if there was one, and warned against letting Demeter's earth come in contact with our skins; so he would be reviewing his knowledge of the rickettsial diseases, and the snarling statistics of mortality. Well, Paul and I in our digging had both shoved our hands in the dirt several times. It flickered through my mind that Paul himself might be ill. He was sick enough, avoiding the cold eye of the .32, but not with fever.

Madison was back. "Dave, why did Paul say everyone was fine?"

"Oh—didn't realize the seriousness. It's all new this morning, Captain. Laurette and I have been caring for her, while Paul was getting on with the work."

I suppose Madison knew I was lying, and knew Paul Cutter had to be my problem. Paul flashed me a sick and haunted thank-you-for-nothing glare. I gave Madison the rest of the report—water pure, test animals in good shape, no time yet for much aerial reconnaissance outside the plateau. At the close Madison said: "Dave, if you possibly can, be on hand yourself when we're due to call in."

"I'll do that, Captain."

"Soon as Miranda wakes up, give her my love. See you, Davy."

I closed the transmitter; studied the man suffering beyond the gun-sights, and holstered the automatic. "Why, Paul?"

He was on his feet and swaying. "Why don't you shoot?"

"No cause, now. You were ready to jump me till I made the report. That was in your face . . . Why?"

"I'm ashamed," he said. "Is that enough?"

"Look: you knew I'd be reporting next time, if not now."

The tremor of his head ceased, his mouth steadied to tightness. A man of twenty-five, he looked forty. "Maybe I thought by that time you'd—understand."

"Or maybe you only saw them leaving, abandoning us, and didn't think."

"Have it your way."

"Paul, while there's any chance at all, they'll never abandon us."

"You're wrong there." He knotted his hands, white-knuckled. "They'll go. Dr. Carey will influence them. Dr. God-Almighty Carey will see to that if no one else does." I scolded myself for failing to recognize the paranoid pattern sooner; or maybe I was wrong now, and seeing spooks. I made a note that I must talk to Carey at the next contact. "Dave—I've said, I'm ashamed. I was afraid and foolish, and I admit it. Isn't that enough?"

"I suppose it is." It was true—he was sick with shame, and other inward disasters; but did shame fit the pattern? I thought, the hell with patterns—the poor devil was human; leave it at that. Of course he was also profoundly hating me. Because I had seen him in an act of dishonesty and betrayal, he would always hate me. I said: "Let's get on with the work."

He stumbled out of the cabin and resumed digging away sod for our test plot in open ground. Attacking it rather—driving the bright blade into the green face of an enemy.

Late in the morning of our fourth day on Demeter, Miranda recovered consciousness. Her fever had risen to a peak of 106° during an interminable night, when the green-white moon of Demeter was to me no longer enchanting, only sickly and baleful. Then, about dawn, the fever rapidly subsided. Miranda came back to me. I could forget about scrub typhus. I could sweep away all the horrors, because I saw memory and understanding and awareness of my kiss.

"How long, Davy? What's the time?"

"You've been out for one day of twenty-six hours. The computer upstairs has dreamed up a calendar for us—got it yesterday. This is Friday morning—sorry fresh out of fish."

"They know of course?"

"Yes, and since you're recovering it won't make any difference."

"So what's the man crying about?"

"Stardust up my nose—itches. How about your foot—does that itch now?"

"Little bit. No numbness. Feels about all right." Under the lens, the puncture spot looked healed, like any tiny injury.

"You got a bite. I'm going after the beast soon as you're up and around—earth samples, and so on. We'll run down the little devil." She couldn't smile much, but she was trying. "He won't stop anything."

"That's right, Bud—we'll rise above bugs and stuff." She was trying, but then her eyes dilated, she winced and turned her face away from me. "Ask Laurette to come, will you please?"

"Yes—what is it?"

"Oh, damn everything!"

"What is it, Miranda?"

"Don't you know?" I suppose I did. "My baby—it was going to be my—my—Demeter's killed my baby."

IV

Saturday morning Miranda was able to sit up without help, and eat. She said she felt nothing wrong except exhaustion. She blamed that on the gravity of Demeter, but I think it was the after-effect of fever; we other three had adjusted to the gravity with almost no effort. Then after a decent meal, an hour of her old love Sibelius on the tapes, and another hour of just sitting with me in the temperate sunlight, Miranda let me talk to her, and suggest that she had not been pregnant at all. Rejecting the idea at first in despair, she presently came around to accepting it, and I felt she was at least half convinced that Demeter had nothing to do with our disappointment. Just before she fell asleep beside me in the sunshine, she murmured: "False-alarm Miranda. From here on out I'm going to try to behave like a rational mammal. But it's uphill work—you know? . . ."

Sunday morning Miranda climbed into the cabin of the plane, wanting to do it without the help of my arm, and talked to Captain Madison and Dr. Dana, rejoining me with a new quiet resembling cheerfulness.

Paul Cutter was speaking to me only when necessary, and with an intense politeness that affected me like a split fingernail. He made a point of asking in private, for "official" permission to carry his carbine. There was no danger in him for the present. My leadership had become an immediate fact; I knew Paul felt terror at the thought of having to assume responsibility if anything happened to me. Actually he wouldn't have had to: Laurette would have stood aloof while Miranda assumed it, and Caliban-as-hero would have minded the chores.

When Miranda promised to loaf and rest, I took off that Sunday morning to blaze a trail alone through the woods to the dead-sand area. Miranda's recovery and her new calm had brought the kind of joy where recklessness bubbles near the surface. It had brought me too a burgeoning love for this one planet among all the stars. In such a mood the foot can slip—mine didn't. I went slowly, mindful of my blazes on the wood of these ancient trees.

The forest was all one hush, cool under the thickness of the canopy. I walked on a carpet formed from the rotted wood and leaves of centuries. Almost no undergrowth. At one place, a tree had fallen from old age; here a hundred saplings of the same species had already shot up high at the touch of the sun. Therefore they grew from seed; therefore the trees ought to bear *some* kind of fruit in their season, whenever that was.

Rarely and far apart, I noticed trees with holes high off the ground—natural holes left by the fall of dead branches and rotting of the sapwood. They were occupied. The corner of my eye caught a squirrely character popping into one of them, and I was aware of the scrutiny of harmless eyes.

After the first mile my ears told me of something larger following. I tried quick turns but learned nothing—once, maybe, a hint of motion

retiring behind the reddish column of a tree-trunk. Anyhow not a twenty-five-foot lizard.

I was humming for a while—Schubert's *Die Forelle* I think it was, or some other memory of Earth equally light and happy.

Observing Dr. Dana's instructions, I was covered except for my face, and I took care not to let that be brushed by branches, though I was fairly sure the enemy I hunted lived under the sand. Close-fitting leggings, shirt tucked in, gloves. I carried a shovel, carbine, hand-ax, a sack with several small bags that could be tightly sealed, and a cage with four white mice.

Not much of a load. I supposed I could drop everything but the carbine, fast, but though I caught a few more dim sounds, nothing bothered me. If whatever followed me possessed anything like my kind of wits, it would know I was aware of its presence.

I came out on the dead sand near that vapor column idly rising from the fissured rock. The vapor gave off a slight sulfur smell. It drifted up with no pulsation, no force. Some age-old dirty business in the gut of Demeter, a planet that never asked for us. Yet I loved her.

Apologetically I set the wire-bottom cage of mice out on a patch of sand, with a cloth to shade them from the sun. Poor little rascals, as martyrs to science they even had their bellies shaved, to make it easier for our enemy to bite them—if it would, if there was such an enemy. I filled the small bags with samples of the sand, the clay patches, the good-seeming earth near the woods, the sod, the forest mold itself. One bag still empty, I searched for Miranda's barefoot print. It had been blurred by a breeze that must have stirred the sand at the edges without obliterating it. No rain had fallen since we landed. Nothing had made tracks out on this desolate ground. The ruts of our plane, our shoe-prints, patches where the jets had blasted sand hollows in take-off—all still plain to read.

For reasons of sentiment or superstition I took my final sample from a spot as near Miranda's footprint as I could set the shovel without destroying the mark—bad science, no excuse offered.

Nothing had followed me out here. If anything watched from the edge of the woods I caught no sense of it.

I had been away from the unfortunate mice for twenty minutes. As I removed the cloth they looked fair enough, but when I raised the cage a midget drop of blood splashed on the sand. I held the cage above the level of my eyes. Two of the mice flitted about in natural nervousness. The others were sluggish, and on the shaved belly of one of them I saw another blood-drop form and fall. No sign of normal coagulation.

I spread the cloth, drove in the shovel where the cage had rested, and spilled out the sand with care. That's where I found the thing, a worm two inches long gorged with blood. With a gloved finger-tip I stirred the sand and found another, not distended, thin as a fine hair and barely visible, the same pinkish-white color as the sand. Exposed, the things moved feebly, obscene head ends lifting and blindly searching, mouth parts apparent as specks of black.

I drew the cloth into the form of a bag, tied it tightly for my collection and started home.

On the way back through the woods I tried to puzzle it out. If nothing ventured on that sand, where did the worms find their natural food supply? Subterranean maybe—burrowing animals, grubs, other worms. I could leave all that to Dr. Bunuan, but it teased my curiosity, reminding me how mystery is always with us. I could not live long enough to see our colony (if there was to be a colony) become more than a trifling spot of intrusion on a most ancient planet. If we had grandchildren to the seventh generation, this world would remain imperfectly explored—and yet some of them would certainly hunger for space flight.

We never really learned much about the beautiful planet Earth.

Twice I stopped to search the forest mold for more of the hair-worms. I found none, but did find more of the stocky brown worms than in the sod of our clearing. They were active, burrowing, wriggling, hunting. I saw one attack a grub. Grasping organs shot out from either side of the worm's head and squeezed the grub helpless while the mouth consumed it. Maybe these brown fellows ate the poison hair-worms.

I glanced up from the vanishing grub, and saw what was lying flat along a branch that overhung my trail.

That clawed track by the pond had deceived me about the size of its maker. The paws were disproportionately large, the animal itself lean as an ocelot, not much bigger. The claws, hooked for efficient climbing and piercing, were relatively immense, partly retractile, though less so than a cat's. The creature was hairless, with a reddish-brown skin obscure against the color of the branch. I saw a narrow-nosed head, like a fox's except that the external ears were mere flaps of skin close to the skull. It had the wonderful deep eyes of a beast that must be mainly nocturnal.

I could bypass that part of the trail and circle around. I said aloud: "Would that sit all right with you, Jackson?"

Jackson winced at the sound of my voice—he shouldn't have, after hearing my no-account baritone murder *Die Forelle*—and flattened himself, or herself, close to the branch. I took up the carbine, seeing the narrow head begin a measuring motion from side to side. The hind-quarters quivered, the motion of the head ceased in a frozen readiness. Not happy about that, I said: "Look, I'm not a deer. I'm not even a darling."

After all, I suppose Jackson could hardly have forgiven that. He was fifteen feet above the ground, six yards from the muzzle of the carbine. He could jump it with no strain and evidently had it in mind. The mouth opened and closed on interesting daggers of orange teeth. My sights steadied on the thin neck. I said: "Sorry, Jackson!" and fired.

Beginner's luck. Jackson shuddered, dropped and lay twitching, orange-red blood gushing from the shattered neck. I turned the body over with my foot. Not ugly nor beautiful, just strange. The sex organs puzzled me—

female I thought, but peculiar. I tied the body to my sack, finding it curiously light. We learned later that the bones are partly hollow, and most of the viscera lighter than the corresponding tissues of Earth animals.

Dissection and observation in the next few days also demonstrated that Jackson, the timid and stupid creatures resembling deer, and the mouse-like animals nesting in the grass, are mammals, in the sense that they bear their young alive and nurse them. And they are functional hermaphrodites. Demeter hasn't arranged for boy to meet girl. Well, we're here to fix that.

The brains, even to my uneducated eye, look primitively smooth.

Maybe we can fix that too . . .

We found poison hair-worms in all the samples of sand and clay from the open ground, none at all in the sod or forest mold. The two lively mice from my cage remained lively—not bitten, apparently. Of the other two, one went into stupor the following day, and died. The one that had been bleeding did not die. Its wound clotted normally soon after my return to camp, and after a period of sluggishness the mouse recovered with no observable after-effects.

We repeated the experiment with other mice—couldn't spare many—and hair-worms from my samples. The results were the same. Under Laurette's guidance, Miranda gladly introduced a brown worm to a hair-worm, with delightful results. In sixty seconds, no hair-worm, the brown guy acting as contented as I do after a mince pie.

Conclusion, given me over the radio by Dr. Bunuan: "You've got a lovely little thing there, boy. Apparently the poison is, or is associated with, an anti-coagulant that probably helps the worm to feed. If the bite is interrupted, likely the poison stays in the wound, enters the bloodstream, generates some kind of systemic toxin. But if your trichinoid critter finishes the drink, I suggest he sucks back most of the poison with the blood and everybody's happy. And let me say, Davy, you people have put through a handsome little preliminary study." O my Miranda, burning that night with a fever of 106° and far away! But there was a sweet healthiness in the biologist's way of speaking; he had not forgotten the pain and terror any more than I had. I reserve judgment on physicists, but I'll drink beer with a biologist any day of the week—if we can make beer on Demeter. "Very handsome, Davy. I wish I was there."

I transmitted his remarks to Paul Cutter. Paul was alone in the clearing outside the shelter, with nothing much to do. We had dug as large a test plot as we needed, the seeds from Earth had been planted—in fact it was almost time for the radishes, rye-grass and other quick-sprouting plants to show themselves if they were going to. I passed on Dr. Bunuan's comment mostly for something pleasant to say. Paul had shown a polite interest in our study of the worms, saying that he had no talent himself for technician's work.

Paul faced me gravely, listened with bent head to my recital of Dr. Bunuan's words, nodded amiably, and replied: "The fundamental error is in the very

first clause—as I tried so many times to make plain. If the colony is to be defined as a *republic*, in that opening clause, you bypass and throw away the entire experience of the 19th and 20th Centuries of Earth history, which is absurd. May I remind you that at the time of the founding of the United States of America, the word ‘democracy’ was a *bad* word, a term of *opprobrium*?” He smacked his fist into his palm; the tawny grazers could have heard his voice and quivered to the vibration half a mile away in the woods. “Now manifestly I am no Marxian. The Russian experiment, for all its important achievements, was ethically and politically a dead end. And why? Because dictatorship supervened. Because in Russia the essence of social democracy was never in effect, once more the cause of the common man was *lost*. Now in the very first amendment I proposed, or I should say *tried* to propose—”

I heard him out . . .

V

Rain fell heavily all through our sixteenth day on Demeter; warm rain without a wind; we huddled miserably in the shelter. Laurette put in the time mending some of our clothes. Paul read, glued to the scanner—politics I guess, or psychology. Miranda played chess with me, and listened to Sibelius.

Our seeds from Earth had rotted. The day before we had dug up a few—squash, corn, garden pea, bean seeds, all sodden pulp without life. But here and there a wheat kernel showed a feeble sprout. Even the busy grubs in Demeter’s earth had not wanted them.

Of course, one can get along on a carnivorous diet. If our rabbits could flourish on Demeter’s grass, probably the sheep and cattle from *Galileo* could do the same. I had shot two of the deer-like animals. We tried the meat on the white rats and then ate of it without harm—muttony and rank, but not impossible.

The rain stopped after sunrise of the seventeenth day. I took off for a wider reconnaissance. Captain Madison had suggested this after learning of the failure of our seeds. Somewhere in the meadows or hills there ought to be edible plants worth a try. Captain Madison had also made it plain that nothing so far reported had discouraged him; his intention was to bring the whole colony down at the end of our four weeks. “Keep in your calculations, Davy, that we’ll bring machines and three hundred pairs of hands.”

It didn’t sound like talk for my morale. And I wondered, I think for the first time, what the mere fact of the pilot mission might be doing to those who remained on the ship. . . .

I left the plateau behind me and flew north, a broadening morning on my right hand. The world glittered from the rain, the forest a field of diamonds. At five thousand feet, I saw that island twenty miles out from the river mouth shining like dawn made tangible.

Del Sentiero’s suggestion of an island for the colony had been overruled;

but shouldn't I at least go and look? Wasn't I playing it by the seat of my pants, accepted leader of the pilot mission?

Accepted anyway by Miranda and partly by Laurette Vieuxtemps. Paul Cutter was still at his brittle play-acting, ludicrously deferring to me, contriving each time to drop a hint that my "glory" would end. He seemed unworried about a bloody nose—may have craved one.

With Laurette, the question of leadership hardly arose, for she was sensible, hard-working; given another year on *Galileo* she would have earned a title. There hadn't been more than two or three occasions when it was up to me to tell her what to do, and those unimportant. She was inevitably remote from us in her religious faith, which answered a need in her mind not present in my own. Unlike our kind, perpetually worried chaplain, Laurette paid Miranda and me the rare courtesy of not trying to change our agnosticism. She may have been privately sorry for us, but we were spared hearing about it. We were friends; we got along in the limited area of mental contact.

Again I did not go to look at my island. Perhaps I was afraid that its summoning beauty was an effect of haze, distance, memory and irrelevant dreams . . . Some of the time as I flew north I was reliving a moment of the day before, when Miranda grinned at me across the shambles of the chess-board and said: "The things that happen when your knights break loose are pitiful, that's all. I find myself caring deeply about that butchered pawn, Captain Leroy." Caring—she wasn't talking about chess. She proved that in the night, when the rain tapped on the roof of our shelter, and she was whispering we'd try again, maybe our child would be the first to be conceived on the planet Demeter. . . .

The seaward slopes of the foothills had changed color after the rain. From an even, reddish green they had become a riot of tomato-scarlet splashes. I supposed—and I was wrong—that the downpour must have brought some plant into sudden blossoming.

I skimmed past the hills searching for a level place to land. Not so easy; the terrain was nearly all sloping, vegetation thick. The radio was with me: I had thought it safer to leave it installed in the plane, on the chance we might have to take off from the plateau in a hurry. Now I could picture myself abandoning a wrecked plane and the only means of communicating with *Galileo*. I could observe a lost human fool groping back twenty-odd miles through unknown forest, no armament except the .32 at my hip, no assurance that I could scale the walls of the plateau if I reached it. Even snug in the perfectly functioning plane, wasn't I a very naked creature in a lonely place? But I think any planet is a lonely place.

At four hundred feet I learned it was no blooming of flowers down there. The brilliance was that of scarlet fruit, on great tangles of low-growing bushes unlike any we had found on the plateau.

Evidently, while it grows, the fruit of those bushes wears a dull powdery bloom. The samples I later secured carried traces of it. It must be that in the final ripening the bloom loosens, washed away by the rain, so that when the hills break out in a sudden gleaming it's time for harvest.

The lizards were at it.

On every hillside where the fruit was shining, a dozen or more of those monsters writhed and scampered on short saurian legs. They paid no heed to the plane, nor to the hundreds of small birdlike creatures that darted about sharing the meal. It was hot holiday for the lizards in the genial sun; their black enormous jaws munched and slobbered, dripping scarlet. Here and there about the slopes, gorged pairs were breeding. When I cut the jets for brief glides I could hear the bellowing and roaring, smashing of bushes and the monstrous slap of black primordial flesh against flesh.

Just hungry and lusty hermaphrodite vegetarians having themselves a Mesozoic ball. But not too good for a little thin-hided foreign mammal who hadn't been invited. I climbed back to a thousand feet and began to get mad. They were first comers by several million years, had a right to the red lush stuff and needed it. But so did I.

A few miles further on I located a small valley in a pocket of the hills, with enough level ground for landing. The eastern of the two slopes closing it in bore the red splashes; the lizards were present there too, but not so numerously. I noticed only five or six as I circled down. If I dared climb that slope on foot for a hundred yards, I would be at the edge of the area where the bushes grew.

It became a thing that had to be done. I don't believe I was trying to prove anything. I haven't much patience with heroes. I'm afraid many of them have been in the pattern of Paul Cutter, ridden by the devil of one idea, and legend has supplied the pleasing part of the picture after silence took them. I'm simply a Randy who loves the idea of staying alive. I just wanted some of that fruit for my people and me.

The clamor of the beasts surged up to me as soon as I shut off the jets. Only a few, they made uproar enough for a convention. I lit nicely, coming to rest in the shadow of a tall solitary tree, and knew I must start at once, or hesitation would demoralize me. I took a sack for the fruit, and my .32, which might at least make me look like a hero later if one of the boys happened to step on me.

I was counting on the dullness of a primitive brain in a saurian hulk, too dim even for curiosity about the plane. I forgot that while the lizards were enjoying rich food and love, something else might be planning to enjoy the lizards. And, yes, there was a slight error of a few million years, for which I had no excuse after shooting mammals on the plateau. If Demeter's evolution has paralleled Earth's as closely as I think, those "lizards" are a survival from long ago. I was mistaking pseudo-Cenozoic for quasi-Mesozoic—Dr. Bunuan wouldn't have liked that.

At the base of that eastern slope the grass admitted some vegetation different from any I had so far seen. Many individual plants—call them weeds—were bushy, some taller than my head. This tall growth thickened as I climbed. For several yards I glimpsed no more of the revels up yonder, only heard the sodden gurgling and the roaring.

In the thicket I won a good look at one of the small flying animals clinging to a tall weed. It let me blunder within ten feet and then sailed off swift and airy. Not a bird; furry, with small teeth; the size of a big robin. The triangular wings are anchored, not to the hind foot like a bat's, but to the animal's side just below a rather large rib-cage. The free hind legs pull up in flight and vanish in the belly-fur. It seemed to me that two of the modified phalanges were projecting beyond the upper angle of the wing, but I couldn't be sure. Maybe they hang themselves up to sleep, like bats.

At the upper limit of the thicket I halted to watch through the leaves. The nearest of the red-fruited bushes were still at some distance. I would have to step out in the open—not nice, but better than scuttling back from the riot empty-handed and licked. I told myself those jolly black nightmares were not aggressive. Their enormous grappling—just sex, Demeter style. I'd heard of sex.

The lizards' vision might be dim; maybe that was why they had ignored the plane. Really there was nothing terrible about them except their size. They wouldn't smell me—a light breeze blew toward me down the slope, bringing me their musky reek.

I crawled into the sunlight holding open the mouth of my sack, and snatched at the red pear-shaped fruit, a little thieving mammal making off with whatever wasn't nailed down. The fruit, big and firm, separated readily from the stems, warm with sunshine, aromatic like musk-melon, smooth and delightful in the hand.

The lizards paid no attention, though the bushes where I was pilfering their steak and potatoes stood hardly twenty yards from the spot where the nearest one of them lurched about alone. And when the other beast crashed out of deep bushes up there on my left, the only lizard that acted aware of the attack was that nearest one—when he was knocked flat by the rushing impact, stricken in the belly by orange fangs.

Earth-born, I thought of it as a bear—shaggy block of body, massive head, thick long-clawed legs. The color was dull cinnamon. It was more than half the length of the lizard it assaulted, and taller—I suppose about the size of the brown Kodiak bears of Alaska. Now, being still alive, I peacefully remember, from boyhood reading, someone's statement that if a Kodiak bear stood upright inside an ordinary house his head would poke well into the second story—so it wouldn't do you much good to hightail into the bathroom and slam the door.

That killer was majestically casual, rearing over the lizard, driving down both forepaws as a bear might grab a log, twitching the black monster over on its back with impudent ease and tearing open the pale belly with a swipe of orange tusks. Then I think it sheared the muscles of the hind legs, the stabbing bites too swift for my eye to follow. The lizard's legs quit threshing; they twitched without effect or purpose. I saw no teeth in the howling cavern of the lizard's mouth. And while the bear began to feed on the slow-dying thing, the other lizards up the slope continued gorging and mating.

I'm not sure a small mammal from Earth's 21st Century should have witnessed that kind of death. No more significant than other kinds, but at this moment of writing I tend to remember it too much: the gaudy mess of it, the other lizards' unconcern, the mindless cruelty that was not cruelty at all but only single-minded hunger. For a second or two there in the sun I myself was lizard and bear, killer and killed, knowing down in the gut how it was for both of them.

After all, in the home cave of one of my great-grandfathers, *Homo Pekinensis*, there was a rather messy assortment of human bones, well gnawed; difficult to hush up that kind of family history.

I backed slowly into the thicket, once more *Homo Quasi-sapiens*. I had my peewee .32 out; my left hand clung to the sack with its couple of dozen lumps of scarlet treasure. Some noise I made must have caused the bear's head to swing. It saw me and stood quiet, measuring me with little wicked orange-veined eyes. A chunk of the lizard's liver hung dripping from its under jaw.

No use trying to freeze; it knew I was alive and interesting. It turned unhurriedly to study me. The piece of liver, bigger than my head, dropped to the ground. Not losing sight of me, the bear snuffed it, swallowed it in a gulp, and walked toward me, head swaying from side to side. Under stress one still observes: for the record, the pair of upper teeth that would be called canine in an Earth animal are about ten inches long, and slant outward; I believe the ends thrusting down beyond the under jaw have a slicing edge on the inner side.

I fired twice, trying for the eyes. Then I was in the thicket, reeling to one side as the crazed roaring mass plunged for the spot where I had been, and shuddered past me down the hill. It fell, rose on its hind legs to an impossible height, fell again rolling, scrabbling pitifully at its head with both paws, as a human being might clutch at a mortal wound. It should have been dead or helpless from the anesthetic poison in those bullets. But it would not die.

I followed. My body was sick and shaking. When the beast fell the second time, I managed to control my right hand and place more shots. One of them pierced the spine, for the bear plainly could not rise. But since it could not even then die, I must suppose the poison of those bullets has no rapid effect in the bloodstream of the animals of Demeter. The deerlike things, and the ocelot-like thing, I had shot on the plateau received heart or head wounds severe enough to account for the way they toppled over without a struggle. That bear was still trying to crawl toward me, hauling with vast forelegs, when I stepped close and put him out with a bullet that shattered the skull.

My wits came back, too gradually. I knew I was hearing something beside the commotion of the lizards up the hill. I pawed at the sweat dribbling into my eyes. Well, of course—that shrill imperious buzz could only be our radio in the plane. *Galileo* calling, report overdue.

My left hand was locked in a grip on that sack or I might have lost it.

I remembered it as I reached the plane and flung it in ahead of me. I croaked: "Leroy to *Galileo*, over."

"Where the *hell* were you?" Madison was shouting. "You all right?"

"Yes. Recon, away from plane, sorry, ran into bit of delay."

"All right."

"Sure. I just—"

He cut in sharply: "Where are you? Where's the plane?"

"I'm about thirty miles north of the plateau. Went to look for edible plants, found 'em too I think. I—"

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"What's the fog, Davy? We can't even find the plateau."

"Fog?" I was panting, sick and stupid. "Fog, on the plateau?"

VI

Madison said carefully: "There are several areas of thick fog over the region of the plateau and south of there. They were still developing when we got your territory in the sights ten minutes ago. Now they seem to have stopped spreading. I'm watching a white blur the same size and shape as the plateau. I can see five other fog areas along the foothills to the south, none up where you must be. Over."

"I'm taking off." I did, my hands thinking for me. The jets roared and I was climbing.

"I think I see you—sun on the wings. In a valley, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"You'll see the fog from six or seven thousand, then save your fuel. And don't get nerved up—it looks like ordinary fog, milky white. I don't see how it could be smoke, starting in so many different places at once. . . . What about that geyser you reported? Are there others like it on the plateau?"

I had seen none; there could have been. A few of the open areas on the plateau were blank sand instead of grass. There could have been fissures with no vapor columns to reveal them. I remembered and mentioned the rain of the day before. "Could that have touched off something?"

Madison said: "Dr. Matsumoto thought of it when we saw the fog. He's sweating it out—I'm no geologist, Davy. He says it's reasonable—if a heavy seepage of water reached something hot underground, you might get a vapor cover like that. If it's just water vapor, it ought to dissipate fairly soon in this sunlight. Is there any wind?"

"Hardly any."

Now I could see it in the south, a horror of sluggishly heaving white where I had left my people at work and cheerful in a sparkling morning. And once again I glimpsed my island, far to the left, twenty miles out to sea. No fog there. A fringe of beach was peacefully gleaming; the low hills stood tranquil under the sun.

"You've reported there's never much wind."

"Only day before yesterday, wind and some overcast, the day before the rain. Inshore and offshore breezes night and morning, but at the camp we've hardly noticed them; the trees shut them away. . . . I'm at eight thousand and going down. I've got the landmarks beyond the plateau that show me where the camp is."

"You can't try to land till it clears—hell, what am I saying? You don't need to be told."

I didn't need to be told, but I wanted his voice, or failing that, my own. I reported on the morning's flight, the bushes on the hills, the shift to scarlet and the reason for it. I told him of the lizards' festival, the thing I had killed, the fruit with me in the plane cabin.

"There'll be food," he said, "and ways of growing more. Ways of doing without most of the things we knew on Earth."

"Including war."

"Including war, I hope, though not the causes of it, which were bound to travel with us, Davy. Look, I must say again, I must make sure you understand—there's been nothing in the reports to change my mind. And this fog doesn't, no matter what the reason for it is. This is our planet and we must take it, never mind your damn dinosaurs and cave bears and hair-worms—that's all duck soup. Don't worry about it." He sounded tired, and hoarse. "Where are you now?"

"About five miles to go. It looks like—just fog."

"What matters," he said, "is our people. The ways of living we must find. New problems. What to do about the—30-per-centers. A lot of things not in the Builders' Directives, Davy."

"We make our own, don't we?"

"Of course. And the Builders knew that. All they could give us were sketches—history. You know, Davy, I'm rather ashamed, how ignorant of history I was until three or four years ago, when Andrea began to get through my engineer's crust. Well . . . With this world we must somehow do better." Then when I most needed to hear him, his voice was cut short by a cough. He spoke two or three more words, blurred as if he had turned his face away from the transmitter. I caught the meaningless hum of other voices near him.

Confusion and then silence from the control room of *Galileo*. Seething below me, a white nothing of fog.

Down in that sea of blindness, Miranda and the others—I couldn't think. I climbed high with full power and drifted down again. If they were alive they would hear the jets. Why shouldn't they be alive? It was only fog—only fog. If it meant some upheaval from underground, that would have happened before, at other rains—but animals and plants lived on the plateau. Why shouldn't my people be alive?

Meanwhile *Galileo* was slipping away to the blind side of the world. I

called them a few times. Then at last: "*Galileo* to Leroy." I knew that voice.

"Receiving."

"Del Sentiero, David. The Captain was called away. One of the patches of fog south of you is clearing. Can you find anything yet?"

"Not yet. Thought I saw tree-tops, but can't be sure. I'm climbing again, to try it from six thousand."

"David, consider this an order, as if Captain Madison were transmitting it. When the fog clears, if you find the worst has happened and the others are lost—though there's no reason I can see to expect it—you will then do everything possible to keep your own self alive, and you will assist the rest of the colony in coming down. . . . Are you hearing me?"

"Yes. The rest of the—"

"We're coming down. Tomorrow or the day after."

"But—"

"Forget the four weeks. I can't give you details—no time, we'll soon be out of range. See anything yet?"

"Treetops—yes—it can't be anything else—yes!" I was babbling. The plane had gone dangerously low. I shot up away from the white confusion, but the spots of darkness I had seen could only be treetops.

Del Sentiero was saying: "You'll find them. Just fog. One place south of you looks almost normal. Did a minute ago, I mean. We're out of sight now." His voice was smooth but faint. I lost some other words in a crackle of static. They would be slipping to the other side, presently watching the depth of Demeter's night.

I rechecked the outer landmarks. The tallest trees near our clearing grew by the pond. I saw those tops rising from the swirl of fog and recognized them, dripping, steaming with a thinner vapor in the sun.

Then at the top of the tallest tree—motion, a flutter of white and blue. Why, on all the world of Demeter I don't suppose there's more than one such bit of color, and that one is a blouse Miranda wears. I was shouting like an idiot as I dipped the plane to let her know I had seen it. Then I swept around and rose—not high this time, no need.

Cottony white smothered the clearing still, but it was dwindling. Soon I made out the upper half of our dome shelter. I could find time now to fret about *Galileo*, and Captain Madison. He couldn't have been called away by trouble with the ship, could he? My ignorant mind pecked at the notion of an error in the orbit—then I was going down into a rolling ground-fog, knowing that the fog was no more than four or five feet thick on the landing strip. I touched down, and stepped into vapor barely waist-high, walked through it over the invisible grass.

Miranda was still waving her blouse like a flag as we ran to each other in the mist, speaking the same stumbling words and not by chance: "What am I without you?"

The damp air carried a faint reek of sulfur and something unidentifiable; not a sharp irritant, merely unpleasant. Some fog swirled to my nostrils;

I breathed it with no apparent harm, as Miranda talked in a roughened, uncomfortable voice.

"The others must be all right. I breathed it, I'm alive. I think they're still in the shelter. I'd gone to the pond for drinking water when it began. I thought, just evaporation from wet ground, then it came thicker, I couldn't see my way back to the shelter. Couldn't see a foot ahead, eyes watered." I saw they were still slightly inflamed; her cute nose was reddened; but she was alive. "I called, I guess they didn't hear—it choked me some, couldn't make much noise. People can't live here, Davy, if this happens."

"No, but I've found a place where they can. Our island—wait till you see—no fog there." I couldn't talk well either.

She was rubbing her face in my shirt. "Couldn't think of anything but that tree."

"Good thinking."

"At the top, it was all around me still, but I knew you'd be coming back. I just hung on—"

I said: "How else would we ever win Demeter . . . ?"

Laurette was in the shelter, in her "room"—we used that word for the plastic-walled compartments that gave us a bit of privacy—and she was alone. I shouted for Paul and heard no answer. Laurette was red-eyed, red-nosed, from the vapor I think, and not from tears. As Miranda hurried in, Laurette looked up from the table where she sat, indifferently, almost as if puzzled by Miranda's urgency.

"Laurette, come out of this! It's clearing outside. Davy's got back." Laurette blinked; Miranda shook her. "What's the matter? Come out into the air, it's much cleaner outside."

Laurette stood up then drowsily and left the shelter with us. She gazed about the clearing, where now the fog was no more than a heaving, milky blur over the grass. She said: "We go on living a while?"

"Laurette, what's happened?"

"Why, nothing, Miranda." She was not speaking impatiently. "I understand it now, that's all. We weren't meant to come here."

"Not meant"—for once in my life I saw Miranda angry. She started once or twice to speak, then only said, with too much restraint: "Forgive me if I don't think you're that much wiser than the rest of us."

"Nothing to forgive." Laurette spoke gently, and with the note of forgiveness. "I'm not, dear, it's not *my* wisdom. You see, we've all been very stupid. The radiation sickness back on Earth—that was the judgment. We should have understood then."

Miranda's brown eyes went incandescent, then quiet. "Well," she said, "maybe you'd still better forgive me, for understanding my own little speck of life rather differently."

I noticed a table outside the shelter, part of Laurette's laboratory equipment, overturned, solutions spilled, glassware broken. No great damage except the loss of several hours of good work. I asked: "Did Paul do that? Where is he, Laurette?"

"No," she said remotely, "I did it. I'm sorry—I guess I got a bit emotional: silly of me. I know you don't look at these things the way I do. Paul—I don't know. He went off somewhere, into the fog." She shrugged, turning more matter-of-fact, more like the girl we had known. "I won't disgrace you again. I can see we're nothing but naughty children fighting against the will of God, but since we're still alive—well, that must be His will too—somehow. I won't say any more about it—you can't see it my way, you don't understand. . . . I couldn't see for sure, David, but I think Paul went—that way." She pointed toward the pond.

"You two stay together while I find him. That's an order . . ."

I found him soon, by the noise of his footsteps, a small man blundering toward me through misty tree-shadows, halting when he saw me, frowning with folded arms but letting me approach, too unhappy to be absurd. His mouth was tight, his inflamed eyes steady on me and aloof. "Leroy—did Captain Madison order you to go on that flight this morning?"

"Order me?" I was stupidly puzzled. "No. He suggested it . . . How do you feel?"

"As you can see, I am still alive." He tapped a foot on the ground, brood-watching me. "He suggested it—I suppose after a conference with Dr. Matsumoto?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I know—I'm not supposed to be able to figure things out . . . I dare say, as soon as you reported that vapor coming out of the rock, Matsumoto guessed what might happen after a rain. Then he, and Carey of course, and Madison—oh well, let it go. You're just a sort of—innocent tool, Leroy. You know that, don't you?"

In a way, I blame Paul's paranoid state at that time partly on the fog. I don't know its chemical qualities—I suppose our experts will study it when the colony comes down—but I do know one true name for the thing that rode that mist: Fear. Laurette had retreated, in her fashion. Paul had retreated, into this. Miranda—just hung on. And I was by force of circumstances a pilot. With a Randy's scattered knowledge of everything in general and nothing in particular, I groped after what I ought to do here and now. I said: "Paul, the colony is coming down tomorrow or the day after. Del Sentiero just told me so."

"Del Sentiero!" Something blazed up cleanly in him—courage or hope or common sense—and a great deal of the misery and sour suspicion drained away. I take no credit for it; I hadn't remembered that del Sentiero was one of the few he admired and, more important, trusted. "Well!—that's different! Tomorrow? They're not waiting?"

"No. The ship went out of range before del Sentiero could explain it, but I got that much for sure. And I've found a place where there's no fog, an island. We're going there now, soon as we can pack up—let's get going."

"An island." He liked that too. He rubbed his face, and smiled, and delivered the greatest understatement so far made on the planet Demeter:

"I suppose my judgment isn't always too good, Dave, and I've been under a—sort of strain."

"Sure," I said. "Let's move." I bumped his shoulder, and we walked peacefully back to the plane, damn near friends.

Today is the 21st of June, and the sound of ocean beyond our shelter is the music I remember from childhood.

It is not the month of June on the planet Earth. Andrea del Sentiero (whom I shall see tomorrow) suggested we might give that name to our first month here, because in the old world June was a month of beauty and beginnings, an end to the troubling dangerous time of spring.

The orbit of Demeter and the phases of the green moon give us a year of fourteen four-week months. We can name the others as we please, when June is over. Next year, if the bushes grow that quickly from the seed I took, the hills of this island will redden with the harvest of early summer. But this is the 21st of June in the Year One.

The island is quiet. I miss the morning and evening music of the birds I remember. I miss the butterflies and moths, the dragonflies. We shall gradually learn about other creatures of Demeter, and our children—if we can have them—will feel no such nostalgia.

A firm beach two miles long faces the mainland, and two promontories like the horns of a crescent create a bay there; it would be a good harbor for boats of shallow draft. I landed on the beach. The larger landing ships from *Galileo* can touch down on the water and ride in easily. East of the crescent, the island is an oval block of about thirty square miles, the only level land in small mountain valleys of the interior. I noticed lakes and streams, one large enough to be called a river. No red fruit grows on the slopes. I believe it will.

We flew low over every part of the island before landing. Miranda spotted a few "deer." No larger forms; no lizards. The bears could be living here—if they are they'll have to go the hard way. We have searched samples of the beach sand for hair-worms and found none. They may be here but didn't Captain Madison himself call that sort of thing duck soup?

We had the shelter up, under tree cover at the edge of the beach, when *Galileo* called in again. It was Andrea del Sentiero. Even that early, I could honestly give him a good report of the island, and he told me once more that the colony would come down without waiting for the four weeks. I asked for three or four days to explore and make sure, and he agreed—I may have spent too much of that time in writing up this sketchy personal account. But we know the island is good. As for shortening the pilot mission—well, those people up there voted so.

In a sense, they voted against the Builders' Directives, or at least against the logic of the pilot mission, which so far as I can see is still perfectly unanswerable—as logic. Against it, our people mount the equally unanswerable logic of love. They said in effect that since we four had come down, they could do nothing but follow.

Del Sentiero said: "David, with regard to Captain Madison . . ."

The silence hurt. I said: "What?"

"I'm sorry, I was hunting for words, but there are none of the kind I need. I suggest you remember the legend of Moses. It happened very quickly, David. A coronary—he'd been getting warnings; no one else knew of it except Dr. Dana. After that coughing spell—I guess you heard it—he turned to us and said: 'Davy's going down, but the fog is clearing.' Then I think his eyes troubled him, because he stood up and tried to move nearer the view-plate. I reached him before he fell. He said: 'We'll do better—we must.'"

"That was all, David—but I think he was satisfied that we would. . . . You agree?"

"Yes."

And I do. Laurette may see us as the naughty rebellious children of God. Paul may spin visions of a perfect state that can never exist except inside the sanctuary of a lonely mind. Miranda will just hang on. And I think we shall be able to deal with each other in charity, more or less, and mind our campfires.

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